

# Where Are the Workers? Exploring Complexities of COVID-19's Impact on the Workforce

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# Where Are the Workers? Exploring Complexities of COVID-19's Impact on the Workforce

## Executive Summary

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 turned the labor market upside down. Job losses shot up and many businesses, if they were able to stay open, experienced significant drops in revenue. Today, the situation is the opposite. Businesses have experienced significant growth over the last two years and job openings currently surpass pre-pandemic levels. In fact, although the labor market started to cool in 2023, recent data from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce show that North Carolina, like so many other states, has more jobs than workers – 61 workers available for every 100 job openings.

With all these data in mind, the ncIMPACT Initiative and NCGrowth partnered on research to better understand the challenges, changes and opportunities that COVID-19 and subsequent disruptions created for the workforce, particularly among young adults. We conducted 21 focus groups with over 130 employers, workforce support providers and young people throughout North Carolina to dig beneath the numbers and hear individual experiences and perspectives. We specifically sought to reach “opportunity youth,” 16- to 24-year-olds who are neither working nor in school. We also sought to maximize variation across employers and employment support providers to capture a diversity of perspectives and to illuminate cross-cutting themes.

Here is a summary of what we learned and recommendations proposed to address the greatest challenges we face in a changing work landscape.

**1. “COVID BROKE ALL THE NORMS” A CHANGING WORKPLACE AND A CHANGING WORKFORCE**

There was universal agreement across participants and locations that the pandemic had profound effects on work and the workforce, even if they could not yet fully quantify or articulate the details. In particular, participants named concerns about long-term effects of a lack of workers and noted that the high demand for workers empowered employees and that employers need to deliberately expand the pool of potential applicants for jobs.

**2. “MENTALLY AND EMOTIONALLY IN WORSE PLACES” ACKNOWLEDGING THE TOLL ON MENTAL HEALTH AND HIGHLIGHTING EFFORTS TO BRING SUPPORT TO THE WORKPLACE**

Across the board, participants acknowledge the significance of mental health for the workforce. Participants shared stories of employee burnout, commented on the effects of isolation and missed opportunities for young people, noted a severe lack of workers in mental health care and related support, and shared devastating stories of suicide and mental health-related hospitalizations. When possible, they also identified the need for supporting mental health in the workplace and more resources to do this.

**3. “YOU’RE THINKING THIS IS JUST SOMETHING EVERYBODY KNOWS, AND THEY DON’T” SKILLS THAT PREPARE YOUNG WORKERS TO THRIVE**

Across many of our conversations, employers and workforce support providers discussed the critical need for employees with skills like communication, time management, integrity and work ethic. Participants used several terms to describe

this skill set. The most frequently used was “soft skills,” but others included “employability skills” and “basic skills.” Despite some minimal differences in terminology, there was widespread agreement about the need for these skills along with a deeply felt sense that young workers were lacking in them.

**4. “THOSE GIGANTIC BARRIERS” THE INFRASTRUCTURE ISSUES THAT CREATE CHALLENGES FOR THE WORKFORCE**

There are some issues facing workers, young and older adults alike, that too often keep them from fully engaging in the labor market. Common issues include transportation, childcare and housing. Any one of these barriers can affect someone’s ability to access and maintain education or employment, but often, individuals confront multiple barriers. These barriers involve large, complicated and expensive systems and created various levels of challenge before COVID-19. However, in several cases, the pandemic expanded or deepened the extent to which workers were impacted. In this section, we touch on three of the systemic barriers mentioned most frequently in our focus groups.

## Recommendations

Enduring solutions to these complex social challenges will not be a one-size-fits-all approach and will require the participation of policymakers, employees, parents/guardians, employers, support providers and educators. These focus group conversations underscored the reality of intersectionality and the need to be mindful of how some solutions may be able to cut across workforce challenges while others will address specific aspects. Indeed, the silos within and across sectors continue to lead to ineffective and inefficient systems at a time our economy desperately needs a strong workforce.

The challenges are great. However, creating real career options and pathways presents a unique opportunity for consensus in the face of so many other more divisive issues. Creating a society where people can build a good life is a common goal. There are concrete steps that most of us can take – some big and some small – to address our current crisis and to build a foundation for more stable and promising careers for future generations.

### **Policymakers:**

Many of the challenges facing young adults and others seeking employment are best addressed with state or federal government involvement. Focus group participants pointed to the following as top policy priorities:

- Affordable housing.
- Reliable and affordable transit.
- Affordable high-quality childcare.
- Affordable skills and educational attainment.

There are also other more targeted policies that can help solve some workforce challenges, for example:

- Establish nationwide data-sharing on wages to help job seekers, support providers, employers and others better understand opportunities within specific career pathways.
- Lower employment barriers for formerly incarcerated persons and those managing substance abuse (second-chance hiring).
- Greater opportunities for work-based learning.

### **Employers:**

Many focus group participants expressed a desire for more communication and flexibility from employers.

- Review existing standard operating procedures to identify opportunities for remote work and more flexible start/stop times.
- Provide clear paths for career growth and articulate them both while interviewing and during new hire training. Concretely describe milestones for career advancement, and, where possible, invest in employees through additional training and professional development.
- Review and update job descriptions, and, when possible, minimize barriers in the application and interview process:
- When possible and appropriate, consider alternatives to the traditional interview process to accommodate neurodivergent applicants. This can include providing questions in advance, altering the interview room environment, and/or using work sample tests rather than interviewing alone.

- Evaluate position requirements and remove those that may be unnecessary and block access (e.g., degree requirements when the position may not truly require one).
- Consider and adjust the unspoken expectations of interview behaviors that may not translate to an ability to do a specific job well (e.g., maintaining eye contact may not be essential to job duties and therefore not essential as an evaluation criterion in an interview).
- Clearly communicate your expectations and be open to listening to the needs of employees.
- Collaborate with current employees to foster a workplace culture of caring and connection.
- Train managers and higher-level workers on engaging with a younger workforce. Skill building is a two-way street, and those at upper levels have knowledge and skills to gain from those much earlier in their careers.
- Update/integrate mental health policies into the workplace, including support for mental health first aid training for employees. Connect employees to resources for mental healthcare, childcare, transportation or other support they need to succeed in the workplace.

Employers create jobs and have many responsibilities for their firms and employees. Therefore, they also have a role to play with policymakers, educators and other employers in solving some of these workforce challenges.

- Engage in conversations about state and federal policy interventions that will make attracting and retaining talent easier, e.g., public transit options, affordable housing, childcare, etc.

- Collaborate with other local employers and service providers to provide career paths that might span different employers. A community-focused approach to cultivating the workforce will benefit all employers in a region.
- Engage with local schools and community colleges to provide job shadowing and other work-based learning opportunities such as apprenticeships and internships.

### **Support Providers, Including Educators:**

- Expose youth to career pathways early and often through many formats, including going to youth rather than only expecting them to come to you via job fairs, etc. Examples could be:
  - Traditional career fairs at untraditional places.
  - Site visits to local workplaces.
  - Job shadowing and work-based learning experiences.
  - “Reverse interviews,” where students ask questions of employers.
  - Social media.
- Work with employers to develop high-quality educational opportunities for in-demand skills and positions.
- Include employability skills in curriculum beginning in middle school through all postsecondary programs.
- Collaborate with other local support providers such as education, local government and social services. Collaborative strategies should focus on holistic approaches and where possible use an “opt out” approach instead of “opt in” to reach more young adults.
  - Asset-based career advising services, especially for youth and young adults.
  - Connections to education/training/pre-apprenticeships for in-demand jobs with advancement opportunities, including help accessing financial assistance, if needed.

- Success coaches to help connect potential workers to wraparound support they may need.
- Expose young people to entrepreneurship as a career pathway and educate them on the promise and peril of the gig economy.
- Collaborate with other local organizations, including religious organizations, to help alleviate workforce challenges, primarily transportation, housing and childcare.
- Engage in regional conversations and solutions around the systemic challenges identified by workers: childcare, housing, transportation, etc.
- Consider identifying and promoting industry-valued short-term credentials that can be a starting point for local careers and provide an easier on-ramp, especially for opportunity youth.
- Find youth champions for your organizations and empower them to bring in others – many youth may follow their peers more than the adults around them.
- Listen without judgment to the perspectives, priorities and preferences of young people.

### **Young Adults and Other Jobseekers:**

- Communicate with your employer or potential employer about your needs and goals.
- Seek community resources that can help you learn more about your strengths and interests and connect you to workforce and education opportunities in your area.
- Set goals. Give yourself grace to not always succeed the first time but to keep moving forward.
- Find a trusted adult – teacher, pastor, neighbor, parent, older sibling – who can help and champion you.

## **Conclusion**

Many of the recommendations above are not new, but the demand is greater than ever before. As the state works to meet unprecedented and unrelenting workforce demands, we must hear and respond to the wisdom of those who know best.

## Introduction and Background

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 turned the labor market upside down. Job losses shot up and many businesses, if they were able to stay open, experienced significant drops in revenue.<sup>1 2</sup> Today, the situation is the opposite. Businesses have experienced significant growth over the last two years and job openings currently surpass pre-pandemic levels.<sup>3</sup> In fact, recent data from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce show that North Carolina, like so many other states, has more jobs than workers – 61 workers available for every 100 job openings.<sup>4</sup>

It is likely that demand for workers will continue to escalate in North Carolina. Large economic development investments, some of which extend beyond the state's urban cores, are bringing thousands of well-paying advanced manufacturing jobs in the next five years. In particular, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law will invest unprecedented billions into infrastructure and clean energy projects across the state,<sup>5</sup> leading to thousands of new mid-skill jobs, often with career advancement opportunities. Additionally, according to projections from the North Carolina Department of Commerce, job growth is expected to continue across most employment sectors and across all regions included in their data.<sup>6</sup>

Combined with an arriving “population cliff,” meaning fewer young people available to enter education and the workforce because of lower birthrates during the Great Recession,<sup>7</sup> there are compelling reasons to identify needs and solutions to support more participation and success in the workplace. This is particularly the case among young

adults ages 16-24, who experienced the highest rates of unemployment at the start of the pandemic and whose labor market participation rates continue to lag both pre-COVID levels and those of older adults despite a somewhat quick rebound from the most significant job losses.<sup>8</sup>

With all these data in mind, the nclMPACT Initiative and NCGrowth partnered on research to better understand the challenges, changes and opportunities that COVID-19 and subsequent disruptions created for the workforce, particularly among young adults. We conducted a series of focus groups with employers, workforce support providers and young people throughout North Carolina to dig beneath the numbers and hear individual experiences and perspectives. We also sought to maximize variation across employers and employment support providers to capture a diversity of perspectives and to illuminate cross-cutting themes.

1 <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/blog/2021/01/13/closer-look-ncs-pandemic-job-losses>

2 <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/report-covid-19-impacts-nc-small-businesses-2020-survey-results/open>

3 <https://www.uschamber.com/workforce/america-works-data-center>

4 <https://www.uschamber.com/workforce/the-states-suffering-most-from-the-labor-shortage?state=nc>

5 [https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/NORTH-CAROLINA\\_Infrastructure-Investment-and-Jobs-Act-State-Fact-Sheet.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/NORTH-CAROLINA_Infrastructure-Investment-and-Jobs-Act-State-Fact-Sheet.pdf)

6 <https://analytics.nccommerce.com/Industry-Employment-Projections/>

7 <https://www.synario.com/enrollment-cliff/>

8 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/12/business/economy/labor-participation-covid.html>



## Seeking Wide-Ranging Input

From January to March 2023, the research team hosted 21 focus group sessions 60 minutes in length with more than 130 employers, employment support providers and young adults. Conversations took place in counties in each of North Carolina's eight prosperity zones, administrative regions that promote cross-agency collaboration.<sup>9</sup> The research team worked closely with local partners in each community to recruit participants to these discussions. For additional methodological details, including an explanation of our data analysis process, please see Appendix A in the PDF version of this report available online.

### Focus Group Session Sites

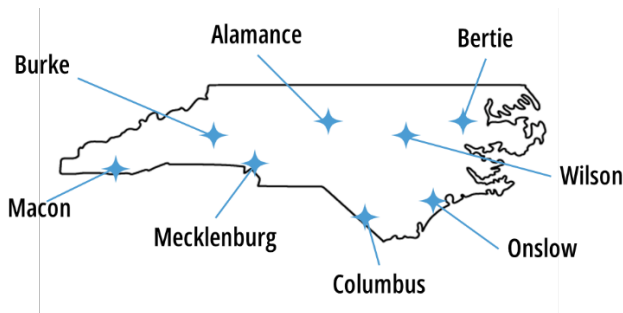
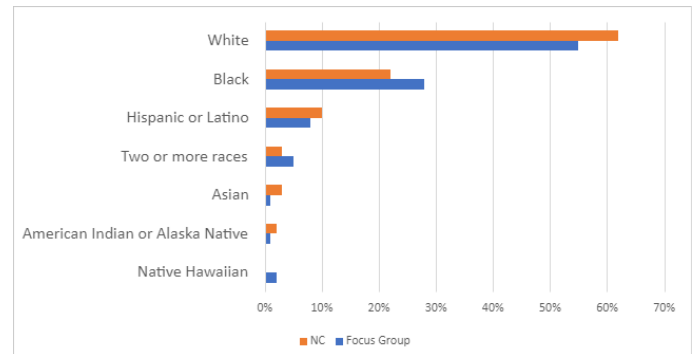
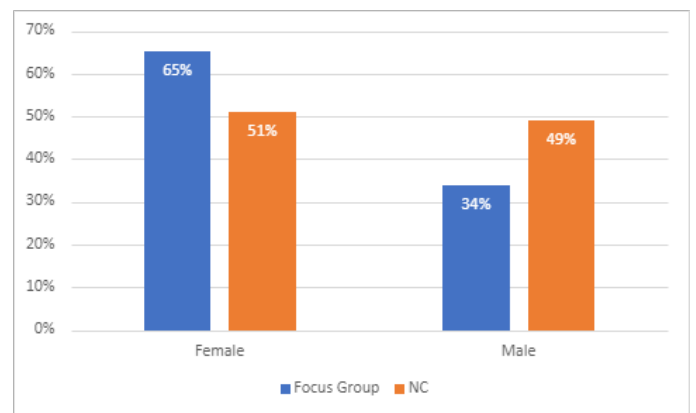


Figure 1



We sought representative participation in the focus groups that aligned with basic state demographics. Overall, focus group participants mirrored state-level demographics for race, with a slight overrepresentation for Blacks, Native Hawaiians and individuals who report being two or more races (see Figure 1). However, there were significantly more female participants than male participants in our focus groups – 65% versus 34% in our focus groups, compared with 51% versus 49% for the state overall (see Figure 2).

Figure 2



9 <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/about-us/nc-prosperity-zones>

Thirty-nine employers took part in the employer focus groups, an average of five per focus group session. These individuals represented a range of business types and employment sectors, including manufacturing, healthcare, food service and hospitality, education, city/county services and nonprofit organizations. We had the most representation in the workforce support provider focus groups. A total of 65 support providers, an average of eight participants per group, took part in these discussions. While workforce support is a broad category, the most common organization types included regional workforce development boards, community colleges, K-12 education, social services and nonprofit organizations.

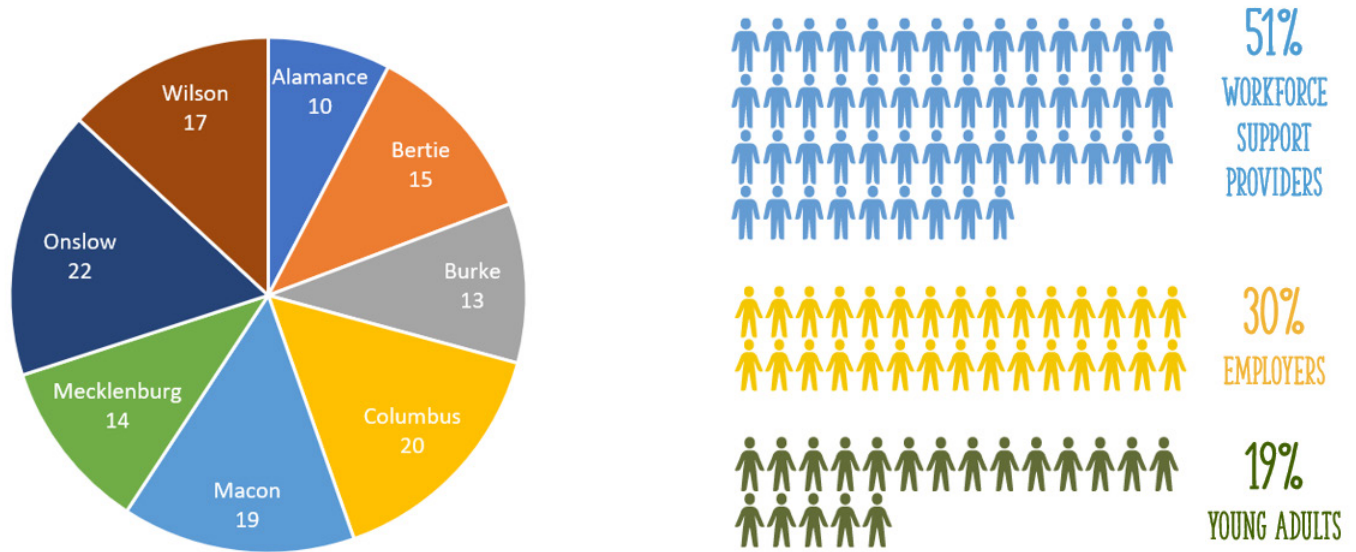
The young adults were the most difficult to recruit for these discussions. There were 23 participants in our youth conversations. Our recruitment strategy had been to focus on youth who met the definition of “opportunity youth,” meaning people ages 16 to 24 who are not working and

not in school. However, our youth participants ultimately included some young people who were working, in school or both at the time of our focus group conversation. In a few cases, the youth focus groups also included trusted adults who were present to ensure a safe and comfortable environment and offer input when appropriate; those individuals were not counted in the demographic results.

In one location, only one young person participated. In this case, the focus group moderator adapted the protocol to an interview format to speak one-on-one with this individual. Of the 23 youth participants, six were not employed or in school, 12 were either employed or attending school, and five were both employed and attending school. Two individuals had less than a high school education, eight had completed high school or their GED, and 14 had or were pursuing postsecondary education, including some type of credential, an associate degree or a bachelor’s degree.

See Figure 3 for the breakdown of participation by location and percentages by population group.

Figure 3



Note: Three adults accompanied participants in youth focus groups but were not counted as youth participants.

## Focusing on Young Workers

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, young adult workers (16-24 years old) experienced higher rates of unemployment compared with workers of every other age group. (<https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R46554.pdf>) This was due, at least in part, to the fact that these workers tended to be clustered in sectors deeply impacted by COVID-related closures and job losses such as food service, hospitality, tourism, etc. Unemployment rates for young adult women were slightly higher than for young adult men (<https://www.bls.gov/cps/aa2020/cpsaat05.htm>) and higher for Black and Latino young adults than for whites (<https://www.bls.gov/cps/aa2020/cpsaat06.htm>).

Additionally, young adults, like students of all ages, were significantly affected by disruptions in education when schools closed and classes moved online. Some students were literally not able to stay connected because of lack of internet or broadband access. Some had to prioritize managing their own health or caring for children, younger siblings, elders or sick relatives over focusing on schoolwork. Others attempted to work or work more hours to contribute to their families' finances. Still others who may have been on a path to pursue postsecondary education paused those plans, in some cases indefinitely. More than three years out from the start of the pandemic, community college enrollment is still well below pre-pandemic numbers (<https://www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/analytics/dashboards/total-headcount>).

There is also a group of young people ages 16-24 who are not connected to school or work. They are often referred to as opportunity youth. Before the pandemic, the percentage of opportunity youth had been declining nationally, from 14.7 percent in 2010 to 10.7 percent in 2019. However, data from 2020 show that the percent of opportunity youth shot back up to 12.6 percent. That is nearly 5 million young people. In North Carolina, where the trends generally mirror the national data, the number is 155,000 <sup>10</sup>. It's too many.

In the first line of her book, "Abandoned: America's Lost Youth and the Crisis of Disconnection," journalist Anne Kim asks, "When exactly do you become an 'adult?'" There isn't one clear answer, but she discusses the critical process of becoming an adult, the support that many young people need to get there, and the consequences when we don't listen to them and give them the skills and opportunities to thrive.

For all these reasons, this research focused our worker perspective on young people. While the voices of young people are included throughout our findings, read our more in-depth spotlight on young people starting on page 15.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://measureofamerica.org/DYinteractive/>

## Hearing Many Voices, Finding Common Insights

Our analysis of the data focused on identifying common themes while noting areas of divergence. Overall, there was significant overlap in the 21 focus group conversations we held, even across population groups and regions of the state. That is not to say that each location and each focus group population was the same or that discussions felt repetitive. Far from it. Each conversation offered unique insights and emphasized specific issues within the areas of inquiry.

For example, in rural communities we heard more frequent comments about a lack of local job opportunities and barriers to transportation, while in more urban locations we heard some extra emphasis on the need for living wages, concerns about rising costs, and supplemental support for populations with additional needs, such as refugees. This report, however, focuses heavily on the most common themes that emerged throughout the focus group discussion to highlight cross-cutting issues and offer impactful recommendations.

### 1. “COVID BROKE ALL THE NORMS” A CHANGING WORKPLACE AND A CHANGING WORKFORCE

Each focus group conversation started with a question asking how COVID-19 had impacted participants' experience with employment. While we expected participants to describe significant and wide-ranging effects, it felt essential to discuss nuances based on population group, the depth of the effects related to the labor market, and the lingering challenges as we look back over the years since the onset of the pandemic. Indeed, each of our three participant groups – employers, workforce support providers and young adults – commented on various impacts, but there was universal agreement across participants and locations that the pandemic had profound effects on work and the workforce, even if they could not yet fully quantify or articulate the details.

For example, a workforce support provider in Burke County commented that we still do not yet understand all the ways that COVID has fundamentally altered our lives and the ways we approach work. He compared it to the breaking of long-held habits, stating:

*“I guess my general theme here is that COVID broke all the norms, broke them. And I don't think anybody realizes how big that is. Socializing norms, work norms, broken. Anything that you do for two years breaks a habit. You quit smoking for a year and people are like, ‘Well done. You broke that habit.’ Well, we broke work habits in school and in the workplace for two years.”*

Across our conversations, participants used words like “unprecedented” and described people being “at their breaking point” when talking about the pandemic. One business owner talked about COVID-19 as a “test of resiliency and sustainability.” Through deeper discussion, several sub-themes emerged that are worth noting.

### Concerns About the Longer-Term Impacts of Worker Shortages

A frequent topic of discussion among employers and workforce support providers was acknowledging, often with some level of exasperation, that they simply did not have enough workers and/or enough job applicants. The comments align with the state and national data cited earlier and, as some of those data indicate, the shortages appear to be affecting certain sectors and geographies even more intensely. In our focus group conversations, these included heightened concerns raised by those in the healthcare and manufacturing sectors as well as those from more rural counties.

A nonprofit healthcare employer in Wilson described having a surprising number of doctors and physician assistants working in her office but was severely lacking in clinical and other frontline staff. This was significantly impairing their overall ability to serve their already underserved population. She commented:

*"We've never experienced times like this, but now it's getting the much-needed support [staff] to those professionals. ... We're in a growth mode because we serve the uninsured and disadvantaged. So, there's a tremendous need there, but that's going to be completely contingent upon if we can hire the folks to do the work."*

Concerns about healthcare worker shortages were not limited to the immediate moment in time. A workforce support provider, also in Wilson County, expressed worries about the number (or lack of) potential healthcare workers in the pipeline, an issue that would only deepen the current shortages. She said, "Right now, we can barely get a nurse aid class going ... the short term, phlebotomies, pharmacy techs, things where somebody could get a job in about 16 weeks. It's very difficult right now to get somebody to commit just to 16 weeks.

Workforce support providers across our focus groups were eager to help employers close these gaps but acknowledged challenges. A participant in Macon County stated, "There is such a shortage. And we talk about, oh, employers [need] to be at the table, but at the same name, we all know the reason they're not at the table is because they've got 10 people doing the job of 20 people. Everybody is maxed out."

Another workforce support provider in Macon County raised concern about employers having to compete for limited workers, not just among other local or even statewide businesses but with organizations anywhere across the country. In a specific example, she mentioned a manufacturer who lost a key engineer to a company in

California. She said, "So now our employers are starting to get the understanding that they are competing nationally with talent, not just locally, and it stresses them out."

Several participants described worker shortages as a pre-COVID trend, but one that had gone from bad to worse. This appeared to be most common in rural communities that experienced the compounding effect of outmigration from their regions. Across the state in Bertie County, one participant shared:

*"To clarify one thing, the stories of the employment situation here in Bertie County and COVID-19, we already had a labor shortage prior to this. So, when [COVID] happened, it certainly did not help, but it's not something [COVID] created. We already were in that situation."*

### **The High Demand for Talent Empowers Employees**

In several of the focus groups, participants noted that worker shortages created a shift in power that favored workers. Some workers now have more options when selecting employers and negotiating benefits. Before COVID-19, salaries and wages were often the main consideration for employment decisions. Now, however, factors such as the ability to work remotely and have flexibility in work schedules are increasingly meaningful to potential employees. In some cases, these elements have moved from a nice-to-have perk to a must-have prerequisite. That is not to say that wages are still not critical to hiring and retaining employees. They certainly are, and several of our participants commented on "job hopping," meaning moving to new positions quickly when workers could make more money. It is also important to note that wages continue to be critical for workers whose positions do not allow them to work remotely, such as in service-based industries.

A workforce support provider in Mecklenburg County mentioned that asking about remote work options has become the first question from potential employees. Similarly, a representative from a local chamber of commerce in the eastern part of the state described the current advantage held by potential employees, stating that their perspective is: “It’s when I work, it’s the conditions in which I work, it’s whether I work on location or remotely. So, there’s a lot more variables at play than there ever have been.”

Many stories in popular media described the pandemic as a time for people to (re)assess what is most meaningful to them, including where work fits into their lives. We heard multiple versions of this sentiment. A workforce support provider in Columbus County said, “Personally, I think people maybe used [COVID] to reevaluate their circumstances. ... When we do have folks come in that are looking for positions or looking for jobs, they really kind of shop for employers and [assess] what are the benefits to having that position.”

In many cases, the young people in our focus groups validated this idea. A young person in the eastern part of the state shared how they and their peers are focusing on which opportunities best accommodate their lifestyle and spark their interests. Wages were universally important to young workers, but our young adult participants underscored the value of flexibility in the workplace. An individual in Columbus County talked about how flexible hours, such as employers accepting requests for a day off, are most important to them when looking for a job.

*“I think post-COVID, if you’re not providing support or flexibility to your staff, you’re probably struggling a little bit. That’s what I look for in a job. And mobility within – I have a terrible track record with leaving a place after two years just because it’s the thought of being at a place where there’s no opportunity for growth.”*  
— N.C. Young Adult

The other aspects of jobs that were most important to our young adult participants included good benefits, upward mobility within the company, feeling respected by supervisors and colleagues, feeling connected to co-workers, and having opportunities for continued self-development and growth.

### **Employers are Working to Expand the Pool of Applicants**

As a result of the worker shortages and increasing employee power, many of the employers we spoke with mentioned the importance of expanding traditional hiring practices as well as putting a renewed focus on retention efforts.

In several of our conversations, participants mentioned a need and desire to expand human capital by seeking applicants who had been formerly justice-involved. An employer in Columbus County stated:

*“I’m a big proponent for the re-entry program. Largest resource of human capital out there are former offenders. Some counties do it a little bit better than others. I will always advocate for the Polk County reentry program, which is probably one of the most successful in our region. That is a huge number of individuals, men and women, that are coming out every day.”*

A participant from Mecklenburg County shared a similar thought while acknowledging that it may take time for people to expand their thinking (and likely their policies) when it comes to those who have been formerly incarcerated. He said:

*“You go into Walmart and you can find everything but a cashier. So, if you were looking, there’s a way to fill that gap in employment with the justice-involved folks. But that’s going to take a mindset shift that we don’t necessarily have time to do, because the gap is going to keep getting bigger if we don’t do something soon.”*

In a few cases, participants mentioned other strategies such as limiting the use of drug testing for applicants and increasing on-the-job training to help increase their pool of eligible candidates. The latter strategy was emphasized by several employers who indicated that they often prefer to train employees in ways that align with their companies' methods, values or culture. For instance, an employer in Alamance County shared:

*"We would rather have people who are not experienced in my industry ... than people who are. Because there are people who think they know how it needs to be done and they don't want to learn. But the people who don't know are like, 'Yeah, show me how to do it.'"*

## **2. "MENTALLY AND EMOTIONALLY IN WORSE PLACES" ACKNOWLEDGING THE TOLL ON MENTAL HEALTH AND HIGHLIGHTING EFFORTS TO BRING SUPPORT TO THE WORKPLACE**

While it can be difficult to isolate and track the impact of the pandemic on mental health, recent survey data show alarming trends.<sup>11</sup> Across age, gender, race and income, a significant number of Americans are reporting high levels of emotional distress.<sup>12</sup> Relatedly, some data has also shown that alcohol use and alcohol-related deaths increased during the pandemic.<sup>13</sup> Some data also show that the pandemic coincided with an increase in drug overdoses, including from opioids, which has been devastating communities for many years.<sup>14</sup> Weave in an increasing divisiveness related to political, racial, social and environmental issues and it is easy to understand why our mental, emotional and physical wellbeing may be suffering.

We heard numerous heartbreaking stories to this effect in our focus group conversations. Examples ranged from widespread reports of increased anxiety and depression among students of all ages to an employer who witnessed three young employees needing to be hospitalized for mental health issues during COVID (something that she had never before experienced in her 35-year career) to an employment support provider who suggested that employers need help dealing with employee mental health, a point she made when talking about an employer whose worker committed suicide on the job.

This paper cannot begin to fully capture the breadth and depth of the comments that were shared on this topic. Each of the examples, personal stories and concerns that our participants offered deserves to be heard. We have included an expanded sampling of quotes on the topic of mental health in Appendix G (available in the PDF version online). In this section of the report, we highlight some of what we heard about the ways mental health is impacting work for young adults specifically and offer examples of employers working to address this need through the workplace.

Several of our participants who work with high school and college students started by raising concerns about an increasing dropout rate. A workforce support provider in Macon County noted that "young people are struggling with completing school. I have also seen an increase in dropout rates as well because they feel like they're stuck. They're mentally and emotionally in worse places. So, they feel like their only option is to quit school at that point too."

11 <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-did-covid-19-affect-americans-well-being-and-mental-health/>

12 <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/03/02/mental-health-and-the-pandemic-what-u-s-surveys-have-found/>

13 <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/news-events/research-update/deaths-involving-alcohol-increased-during-covid-19-pandemic>

14 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8856931/>

For those who make it out of school and into the workforce, the transition can be difficult. A few participants described the struggles that some young people faced as they transitioned out of an online school environment and into jobs. In Onslow County, a workforce support provider described the following:

*“But then when it comes to the social-emotional aspect of it, like I had students who were homeschooled, and then I tried to get them into workforce, and they’re having nervous breakdowns because they don’t know what to do, and how to integrate, and how to survive, and how to communicate.”*

Related to this, a young adult in Macon County who was not currently working mentioned that managing her anxiety is a factor when she considers job opportunities. In particular, she needs jobs that include a stable and predictable schedule. She said, “I try to look for a stable schedule because I deal with anxiety and stuff a lot and I just need that set schedule to kind of help me.”

A bright spot in some of our conversations about mental health was hearing employers and support providers who were working to provide mental health services in the workplace. An employer in Wilson County has been offering free visits with a counselor for her employees for many years, including before the pandemic. She describes the service this way:

*“I have a family therapist that comes in once a month and visits both of my restaurants, and everyone has his number. So, from a mental health standpoint, if they have a crisis, they can call him and it’s free. And when he’s in town, they know his schedule, when he is going to be in town, so they can set up a one-on-one appointment with him away from the restaurant.”*

Unfortunately, these examples were rare. Too often, a shortage of mental health service providers created a barrier, even when the desire to offer support was there. An employer in Columbus County shared the following:

*“I reached out to them [a healthcare organization] about having people come in, counselors, and just how maybe once a month or once every quarter have them come in and give different topics and how to cope and things like that. Couldn’t get anyone from there. Then I contacted a privately owned mental health facility. They couldn’t help.”*

Of course, there are many ways to support mental wellbeing at work. Feeling valued and respected as both an employee and a person was mentioned frequently in our conversations. Few of these mentions were specifically in the context of improved mental wellbeing at work; however, it is reasonable to think it’s related. Along these lines, a few examples from our employers on how they do this ranged from small gestures of appreciation, such as free food and occasional celebrations, to helping workers expand their opportunities and grow in their careers.



## Spotlight on Young Adult Voices

While young adults' views are embedded throughout this report, this section elevates their voices so that we more directly capture their perspectives.<sup>15</sup> It's not feasible to share the full array of insights and stories that young adults generously offered during the focus groups, sometimes in ways that likely made them feel vulnerable. Nonetheless, the following attempts to distill what we heard.

Young adults shared that COVID lessened the quality of their education, diminished their opportunities and made life more difficult.

Like everyone who endured the pandemic, young adults experienced many hardships during COVID. Many shared the perception, however, that young people experienced disproportionate impacts because of the pivotal time in their lives during which COVID arrived.

Young adults shared that online high school was not comparable in quality to in-person classes and had a negative impact on their mental health. As one said, "Becoming an actual adult in a world where you can't interact with your friends regularly during COVID is ... it was detrimental."

*"We weren't doing a lot, we couldn't go out, we couldn't really enjoy ourselves. . . Our teen years, we're supposed to be excited. We're supposed to have adventures, but everything was shut down. . . I feel like we kind of missed that part of our life, that experience that we were supposed to have." — N.C. Young Adult*

One young adult said he left high school in another state during COVID-19 and went to Mexico, where his family is from, and worked as a janitor for two years before coming

to North Carolina, where he is now working toward his high school equivalency. This disruption delayed his high school completion and altered his career timeline.

Young adults also offered examples of canceled experiences and shut-down jobs. One young woman shared an enduring impact:

*"I had got accepted to go to a ... seminar. It was a weekend thing, and I think it was somewhere in Connecticut. I was going to be the first one from my school to go – and everything started, and they shut it off. And the next year, I couldn't go because I was a senior ... that just kind of dawned on me because I could've had that experience to add to anything. I'm applying for a job – I could have added that up there. Applying to colleges – I could have put that on my application."*

Young adults shared their distrust and adverse experiences with some of the people and systems around them.

The examples of distrust and adverse experiences we heard from young adults traversed many aspects of work and education.

One young adult said he didn't trust online job postings, saying, "I keep scrolling" because he thinks many are scams. Another said that employers "take advantage of you," and one young man reported getting physically hurt on the job because no one was looking out for him.

One young adult shared that his family doubted his interest in college and didn't help him complete the federal application he needed to receive financial aid –one reason he didn't enroll in community college after high school. Another stated that staff at his school didn't support him because of his ethnicity:

15 Given the relatively small number of participants, we do not indicate the geographic location of young adults when quoting them here and elsewhere in the report to ensure privacy.

“They are supposed to be helping people, and they didn’t tell you about the programs. They just shut up and don’t tell you anything about them because you are Latino.”

*“I don’t have an answer for you, but I just want you to know people like me exist. They hide, but they hide because they are afraid. They don’t know how to find the opportunity America has for them. There are many people who do not have someone to help them find opportunities.” — N.C. Young Adult*

### **“Real jobs to make real money”: Young adults believe that many jobs do not provide worthwhile opportunities**

Young adults expressed concern about the quality of opportunities available to them. A young adult said, “I don’t really think the community is necessarily doing anything about the workplace. They’re giving jobs.”

Another stated, “I think this city needs real jobs to make real money ... food going up, gas going up.” A young adult from a rural community said, “Everything is so small and there’s not really anything around. You just have to take the closest job.”

Young adults also shared concerns about the benefits from working and a lack of employer support. One said, “Some of us stay in public housing; public housing takes half of what you make. You have to pay the whole thing, so when you actually finally get a job, you don’t have anything really.”

Another shared, “Even if we get a good job, who’s going to constantly keep looking out for the youth on the job, train us?” This participant noted that other caring adults in their life would continue to monitor and support them, but that employers, in their experience, had not provided that type of support or ongoing training to ensure they thrive on the job and feel cared for as an employee.

### **Some young adults shared behaviors that contribute to job churn**

One young adult described “job hopping” behaviors among her peers: “And while they’re waiting for the job, they apply somewhere else, and then they get the first job. And then they lose it, and they have to go back to the second job and say, ‘Hey, is this still available?’”

Another shared seeing young people leave jobs for personal reasons:

*“I see people changing jobs a lot, and I think that’s more to do with the people they’re working with than the job itself. Maybe you like the job, but you don’t like your manager or your boss or something. Somebody in the chain of command that you just don’t get along with. I think that’s the reason why people like to change jobs.”*

It seems plausible these behaviors that contribute to job churn are related to the previous theme – young adults have a mentality that jobs are plentiful and easily replaced because they do not lead to growth or a larger opportunity.

### **Young adults expressed difficulty envisioning and executing next steps for their future, but long-term goals or values appeared easier to articulate**

*“I feel like whenever you ask kids our age ... ‘What are you going to do in five years?’ everybody goes blank. They don’t have a reason to say anything. They don’t have a drive to look at anything. That’s a lot of kids our age, and it’s kind of sad to see in a way. It is. But I do feel like kids. . . really do get stuck with trying to find what the future is, and what the drive is, and what route to take.” — N.C. Young Adult*

Some young adults shared their difficulty envisioning the future and navigating next steps around education and employment. One said, “I mean I can talk about going to college, but I can only actually visualize next week.” Another said, “I’m technically now an adult but still can’t picture my future as an adult.”

Meanwhile, we also heard from some young adults who described their long-term goals and what they value in the workplace. One shared, "My long-term goal is to make sure my family's all right. Everybody say they want themselves to be all right, but let's be honest, everybody in this room loves their family."

Another young adult said,

*"I want to go to a trade school. I actually want to become something bigger. Yes, working a job is ... sometimes it can be easy, sometimes it can be hard. But I want to work for myself now ... I don't want to work for other people my whole life."*

*"My ideal work environment is to work with people that are loving, respectful, caring, who are also doing their jobs. Yes, we're here to make money, but we also respect each other and care about each other." — N.C. Young Adult*

### **Young adults value and appreciate guidance and support from those around them**

Caring and connecting were two forms of support we heard as beneficial to young adults' education and employment paths. One shared:

*"But if you have ... individual people that grab your hand whenever you're down sinking, then it helps so much because it's like then they can actually put you in a path to find your future, what you want, and actually go deep down in with you and see what your drive is to see ... what makes you happy in the long run."*

Several young adults shared specific forms of support that helped with success in the workplace or education. For example, one described someone connecting them to programs to help them earn their high school equivalency, and another shared how someone at their high school assisted them when applying to college.

One young adult described the flexibility and understanding they received from an employer because the car they use for work also takes siblings to school and a parent to doctor appointments. "If I'm late, they just ask if I can stay longer," they shared.

One young adult expressed appreciation for an employer who gave them a stable work schedule, which helped them manage their anxiety. Another young person who indicated they are on the autism spectrum described how receiving "very, very explicit instructions" helped them be a successful employee, "even if it's for a task that you would consider simple – because it's not always simple for us, and we're awesome."

### **Nuanced Perspectives**

Encapsulating the rich and diverse voices from the young adults who took part in focus groups is not easy; however, perhaps the strongest undercurrent lying beneath so many of the experiences and stories we heard was a sense of uncertainty and searching for their future.

Employers and support providers in our focus groups described barriers young adults face because of COVID-19 as well as systemic challenges. They also shared ways in which young people could grow and improve. Young adults spent less time describing specific barriers, instead sharing more about what they lost during the pandemic and offering the sense that they feel they are still on the starting block of their adult lives and are appreciative of guideposts, connections and support.

While in many ways this seems similar to previous young generations, it also seemed that the young adults with whom we engaged were short on expressing optimism and confidence about their futures in a way that may be a departure from how older generations felt at their age, even among those who came from similar backgrounds.

### 3. “YOU’RE THINKING THIS IS JUST SOMETHING EVERYBODY KNOWS, AND THEY DON’T” SKILLS THAT PREPARE YOUNG WORKERS TO THRIVE

Across many of our conversations, employers and workforce support providers discussed the critical need for employees with skills like communication, time management, integrity and work ethic. Participants used several terms to describe this skill set. The most frequently used was “soft skills,” but others included “employability skills” and “basic skills.” Despite some minimal differences in terminology, there was widespread agreement about the need for these skills along with a deeply felt sense that young workers were lacking in them.

For example, a workforce support provider in Burke County said, “There’s a lot of just soft skill development that is lost.” Another in Mecklenburg County stated, “You’re not really thinking about assessing their soft skills because you take them for granted. You’re kind of thinking that this is just something everybody knows, and they don’t.

Conversations most often centered on skills such as time management and communication, but many of our participants expanded into capabilities like critical thinking, adaptability and coachability. An employment support provider in Columbus County talked about it this way:

*“Critical thinking, the ability to adapt to the changes of the business. Even in a manufacturing setting, they want somebody who can troubleshoot a machine or go from one machine to another. ... I would say critical thinking, the adaptability, the flexibility, especially because employers are trying to do more with fewer workers, and people have to be responsive to that.”*

An employer in Wilson County offered a similar comment about what they want to see more of in workers. He stated,

*“[It’s a] commitment to learning the job, commitment to showing up every day, being willing to be coached, commitment to your teammates, your co-workers, a sense of purpose.”*

Most of the focus group participants that we spoke with attributed the lack or decline in these skills to the pandemic, and more specifically to an online-only environment and the isolation that came with that. An employer in Columbus County commented,

*“[Young people] are not being taught [soft skills], and since COVID, it has only gotten drastically worse.” A workforce support provider in Macon shared, “They are behind in the soft skills and social skills because they were cut off during the pandemic and didn’t have as much connection to their peers and to people.”*

As mentioned previously, some made a clear link between a loss of social skills and an increase in anxiety or other mental health challenges. For instance, in Macon County, a participant shared:

*“A trend that we have seen, especially after the pandemic, is that a lot of our students are coming in with more mental health diagnoses. And so, it’s really causing, where we are supposed to work on those soft skills and employability skills, stuff like that, they’re way quicker to either just drop out or there’s more behavioral problems because they have been more isolated.”*

Recent reports suggest that the pandemic has indeed created a deficit around these types of skills and that some employers are now working to provide them as part of employee training programs.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, a small handful of our focus group participants commented that soft skills training and skill-building programs goes both ways, and suggested that managers and supervisors may need their own type of training to more effectively collaborate with, understand and support young workers. An employment support provider in Mecklenburg said:

*"I think one thing that would probably be really helpful is if we had employers come in and do those same soft skills trainings ... [so] that they see that they have to communicate that expectation and how to communicate that expectation."*

Somewhat related, a few comments also revealed a need to ensure that young employees understand requirements and expectation around benefits like sick leave and other paid time off. In Burke County, a workforce support provider shared an example of a young worker who was not aware that they needed to report coming in late for a doctor appointment. In this case, the employer called the employee because they had not arrived to work on time. In another example from Wilson County, an employer talked about young workers being aware of and careful with their paid time off so that they are not "burning their PTO so quickly that they get in a bind."

Finally, though not a skill per se, many employers and workforce support providers commented that young people need to better understand and improve general office behaviors. The most prominent example was limiting phone usage while at work. This came up more often from employers in manufacturing and customer service sectors but cut across many of the conversations. An employer in Onslow put it this way in talking about young workers: "Who's going to show up on time, do everything that they're tasked with for the day, and stay off of their cellphone. That's what we're looking for."

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16 "Young Hires Are Ill-Prepared – 'How do I do that?' Remote learning left students short of basic skills." <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2844994802/9A5EBBA5A2B42E1PQ/1?accountid=14244>

## A Skill Set by Many Names

Some called them “employability skills,” most called them “soft skills,” and employment-focused training tools and human resource professionals are increasingly calling them “durability skills” or “power skills.” The names may be different, but the definitions are similar – these are the nontechnical skills that are applicable across job types and careers that help people thrive in the workplace and beyond, and showing mastery does not translate easily to test results or a credential. However, throughout our focus groups, there was universal agreement that this diverse skill set is critical, and employers are desperately seeking workers who possess them.

Our participants focused on three main aspects of these skills: 1) interviewing and getting hired, 2) being successful in the job and throughout your career, and 3) skills aimed specifically at young adults. Below is a listing of specific skills that were mentioned in our conversations. They range from straightforward (and potentially more easily taught through training and developing strategies) to more complex character traits that participants described as “inherent” and perhaps harder to teach.

### Interviewing and Getting Hired:

- General writing and email communication.
- Resume writing.
- Dressing for an interview.
- Using zoom and virtual interviewing.
- Leadership.
- Integrity.
- Adaptability and flexibility.
- Coachability and/or growth mindset.

### Success in the Workplace and Career:

- Critical thinking.
- Conflict resolution.
- Problem solving.
- Collegiality and teamwork.
- Networking.

### Sampling of Skills Aimed at Young Adults:

- Time management.
- Dependability.
- Work ethic and motivation.
- Eye contact.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, some of our young people weren’t familiar with the term “soft skills” or similar terms to describe these skills. Being specific in naming skills and providing examples may be important to ensuring that young adults can deliver on expectations.

17 Some of our young adult participants specifically mentioned difficulty with eye contact due to issues of anxiety. Eye contact, along with dress and some physical attributes, may be more or less of an important factor depending on the position or industry sector, rather than something that may be more universally necessary, such as time management. Additionally, it’s important to mention that cultural norms and expectations can vary widely across country of origin as well as by neurotype. These factors are not necessarily “skills” nor do they equate to ability or intellect, but we include them here because of the frequency with which they were mentioned in our conversations.

#### 4. "THOSE GIGANTIC BARRIERS" THE INFRASTRUCTURE ISSUES THAT CREATE CHALLENGES FOR THE WORKFORCE

There are some issues facing workers, young and older adults alike, that too often keep them from fully engaging in the labor market. A participant in Columbus County said, "When we talk about the rural Columbus County side of things, [there are] those gigantic barriers: housing, transportation, daycare." Any one of these barriers can affect someone's ability to access and maintain education or employment, but often, individuals confront multiple barriers. These barriers involve large, complicated and expensive systems, and created various levels of challenge before COVID-19. However, in several cases, the pandemic expanded or deepened the extent to which workers were impacted. In this section, we touch on three of the systemic barriers mentioned most frequently in our focus groups.

##### Transportation

Participants in nearly every region expressed concerns about transportation. Public transit options vary widely across the state and are especially limited in rural areas. According to a few of our participants, even ride-booking apps like Uber and Lyft are not options, as there is little incentive for drivers to make long-distance trips. In urban areas, where public transportation may be more prevalent, getting from point A to point B can require navigating multiple routes and is time consuming. If someone works a second or third shift, public transit hours may be limited or nonexistent.

Complicating the issue for some young adults is a lack of access to and affordability of driver's education. Focus group participants shared that young people increasingly lack a driver's license and/or do not own or have access to a car. COVID shut down driver's education programs, creating backlogs and delays. An employment support provider in Jacksonville mentioned that many young people are waiting

until they are 18 to even attempt to get a license, and when they do, they face the high costs of driver's education courses and car insurance. This creates a double barrier: First, a driver's license is often required as part of a job or at least as part of a job application. Second, without a driver's license and a vehicle, some employment opportunities are simply too difficult or time consuming to access.

Interestingly, the inability to drive was also mentioned in one of our focus groups with workforce support providers serving a large refugee population. One individual shared,

*"The hardest part for us is to find [refugees] transportation because most of them don't know how to drive. They have to learn how to drive. They don't have enough money to buy a car, so they have to save to buy a car."*

The challenge was compounded for some refugees with limited English proficiency or difficulties with citizenship documentation, an issue that was raised by a few of our young adults as well. Additionally, some participants also mentioned transportation challenges for people with disabilities. A workforce support provider in Alamance County shared that many of her clients are not able to drive because of their disability and that some also had difficulties accessing public transportation. She described this as "a huge barrier."

##### Childcare

Participants also frequently mentioned childcare as a barrier for some workers, including young adults. The key concerns among our participants were both access and affordability. Formal childcare, including day care centers and Head Start programs, often do not have hours that align with work schedules. This creates difficulties for workers who do not have the flexibility to leave work early or arrive late to accommodate childcare pickup and drop-off times.

Workers with less flexible schedules may also sometimes rely on informal childcare (e.g., a friend or family member) or use this to supplement traditional childcare, which can present logistical and safety challenges. Either way, using formal and/or informal childcare can be expensive. Several focus groups participants raised affordability as a key concern.

These scenarios assume that childcare of any type is even an option. In many regions, particularly rural ones, there is simply no childcare. Many day care centers closed during the pandemic and never reopened, reducing overall access and creating childcare deserts.<sup>18</sup> This was the case in one of our rural focus groups, where a participant stated, “[Day care] just shut down in that region, so they had to transport their kids like 30-something miles this way, 40-something miles that way.” A recent report from the Bipartisan Policy Center indicated that 86 percent of rural residents who are not working cite childcare as a factor in that decision.<sup>19</sup> A separate nationwide survey from the center indicated that 66 percent of parents report that childcare affects how many hours they can work.

When forced to decide whether to work or care for a child, many workers choose the latter. Also, we say “choice,” but for many it may not feel like that, and the consequences could have lasting affects for longer-term career advancement and salaries. One participant shared how several women had dropped out of their HVAC/electrical training program, which would likely lead to employment

opportunities that pay above the average salary for the state,<sup>20</sup> stating the reasons as, “I really need to do something where I can work from home.”

Interestingly, concerns on the topic of childcare extended to cover childcare workers as well.

For instance, an employer in Columbus County said, “The day cares now cannot keep up with the wages. They can’t pay their employees enough to compete with the other jobs available.” A recent report released jointly by the Child Care Services Association and the North Carolina Partnership for Children focused on raising compensation for childcare workers and described them as “the workforce that supports all other workforces.” In the report, they call attention to the low wages for this sector and compare the starting hourly wage for a lead teacher in a five-star childcare center, which is \$13.46, to that of Walmart cashiers or Amazon delivery workers, who make \$15.28 and \$16.50, respectively.<sup>21</sup>

## Housing

Housing insecurity was also frequently mentioned during our focus groups. Data show that housing prices have climbed steadily for the last several decades, with an even greater spike during the pandemic. Despite wage increases in the last few years, especially for lower-paid jobs, they simply have not kept pace with rising rents and house prices.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, the inventory of all types of housing – rental and purchase – continues to be at historic lows.<sup>23</sup>

18 Center for American Progress. May 2022. “Rural Communities Need Federal Child Care Investments” <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/rural-communities-need-federal-child-care-investments/>; Lee, E. K., & Parolin, Z. (2021). The Care Burden during COVID-19: A National Database of Child Care Closures in the United States. *Socius*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231211032028>

19 <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/rural-communities-feel-lack-of-child-care-options-more-acutely/>

20 According to Glassdoor, the average total salary for HVAC technicians in North Carolina is over \$64,000, slightly above the overall average wage of \$62,000. [https://www.glassdoor.com/Salaries/north-carolina-hvac-technician-salary-SRCH\\_IL.0,14\\_IS1282\\_KO15,30.htm](https://www.glassdoor.com/Salaries/north-carolina-hvac-technician-salary-SRCH_IL.0,14_IS1282_KO15,30.htm) and <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/north-carolina-county-average-wages/open>

21 <https://www.smartstart.org/child-care-workforce-compensation-a-key-component-for-economic-recovery/>

22 <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/MSPUS>; <https://www.nber.org/digest/202207/pandemic-induced-remote-work-and-rising-house-prices>

23 <https://www.bankrate.com/real-estate/low-inventory-housing-shortage/#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20National%20Association,enough%20to%20meet%20the%20demand>



This can prevent potential workers from moving to regions where job openings are greatest and can limit opportunity if jobs do not pay a living wage for that location. An employer in Bertie stated, “But even if we can hire you, you ain’t got no place to live.” Over in the far west, a workforce support provider shared a similar situation. She said:

*“I know we’ve probably all heard stories around this table of employers that made an offer to hire someone. ... I know this happens at [a local university] as one major employer in our region, and the individual couldn’t find a house to live [in], and so they ended up not accepting the job.”*

## Seeking Solutions

Many of the employers we spoke with genuinely wanted to adapt to the needs of the changing workforce, even when they were not completely certain how best to do it. A participant representing a Latino-focused organization noted that, in their experience, COVID-19 had made employers more compassionate, which was creating room for a different type of cooperation and negotiation around work and working conditions.

When possible, participants shared solutions that have worked in their communities and made recommendations for solutions they believe need to be put in place. Many spoke of the need for more dedicated efforts toward collaboration between employers and workforce support providers. One employer in Wilson County noted that collaborations need to be long term, not just one or two years. Many recommendations focused on the types of infrastructure barriers mentioned earlier, including transportation, childcare and housing, as well as improving broadband internet access.

Participants spoke about solutions to help workplaces attract employees. Both employers and young adults emphasized the necessity of paying a living wage and providing benefits. Another employer in Wilson County

explained the importance of employers’ care for employees, giving employees ownership over what they do, and providing a mission and purpose from the start of an employee’s time at the company. Relatedly, others discussed the need to frame opportunities as careers instead of “just” a job.

Concrete suggestions to accomplish this included showing a progression pathway following an entry-level position and developing “certified career pathways,” a strategy being explored in Columbus County. Another strategy to attract employees includes publishing recruitment materials in various languages, such as Spanish if the employer is in a Spanish-speaking community. This example is only a first step, though, and deeper engagement with diverse populations requires sustained relational work. Employers in Alamance County noted distribution of recruitment materials through both social media (Instagram, Twitter, etc.) and traditional media (flyers on community boards) to help reach young adults in particular.

Strategies to attract students to educational opportunities focused primarily on the ability to provide support throughout a degree or training program. Support providers in Wilson County mentioned programs they have to provide resources like uniforms and books to students. Participants across the state also emphasized how stipends were key to attract and retain students. In Mecklenburg County, support providers noted that hybrid opportunities help students engage depending upon their needs, but noted that being able to thrive ultimately comes down to the student’s commitment to their training or education.

Another common solution to a real or perceived lack of engagement was to provide young adults with exposure to career options early and often. Employment support providers and employers from multiple regions spoke of the need for consistency in exposure. For example, students need to start hearing about the opportunities in their communities in kindergarten, with multiple exposures

throughout grade school, so that by the time they are in high school they know what options they can explore. In Wilson County, a support provider participant stated that successful outreach sparked the interest of two young women, who then signed up for an automotive class. Exposure should include awareness of the pathways, such as whether a job requires a four-year or two-year degree, or another type of certification, not just the final career.

*“As a former career development coordinator within K-12, one of the things I realized was that sometimes we take for granted that kids just know, and they really don’t know. You think that they understand what is required for a particular profession, and they really don’t know. So that if that is the case, it has to not just start at high school, but it has to start earlier. Even as early as elementary school and doing that awareness.”*  
— Support Provider, Bertie County

Participants offered innovative, out-of-the-box solutions that pivot from what has traditionally been done in communities. In Burke County, an employment support provider introduced the idea of a “reverse interview,” where students were given the opportunity to interview the human resources director of a local furniture manufacturing company to help them learn and engage with the industry. Participants suggested letting go of traditional hiring practices that create barriers, such as job applications that are 10 pages long yet could be shorter. Some suggested providing opportunities for hybrid workplaces, and where that is not possible, shifting the work week. One Columbus County employer shared a success story of shifting to a four-day workweek where employees work four 10-hour shifts and gain a three-day weekend.

As previously mentioned, the importance of re-entry programs for community members who have been formerly incarcerated came up in multiple focus groups. During the conversation with Onslow County workforce support providers, participants discussed a “reentry simulation” run by one participant’s organization, which guides individuals

through what it looks like to get an apartment, pay bills and rent, and how to approach job applications. Other focus group participants suggested that a version of this program for young adults could be extremely helpful in giving them an idea of what kind of employment they need to make ends meet and ensuring that their basic needs are met, allowing them to focus on work and other life goals.

Along a similar line, one participant suggested a work readiness pipeline that could mentor and support young people as they transition from education to the workforce. This transition process could also provide or supplement skill development as needed. Relatedly, the value of mentorship, both formal and informal, cannot be overstated. We saw this directly in our youth focus groups that included trusted adults in the room who provided a sense of safety and support during conversations and heard young people describe the impacts that caring adults had on their lives. One young adult said this in describing an adult who helped her get her GED: “I felt incredibly lost walking into that office, and she was just a godsend and she made me feel incredibly supported throughout the whole thing.”

A final (and arguably most important) solution was to keep young adults in the conversation. Employment support providers in Morganton explicitly stated that employers and other support providers need to stop making assumptions about what young adults want. Instead, it is vital to listen directly to young adults when guiding them one-on-one or when developing larger solutions. Young adults echoed the need to work together to solve the issue of lack of engagement in employment and education. It feels important to acknowledge that this is difficult to do meaningfully as we can attest to, given our struggles to connect with opportunity youth ourselves, but the genuine effort to connect is a critical starting point.

*"You just have to work together as a team. You got to do this together. Just realize that these people are here to help you, just keep that motivation and stay true to your word." — N.C. Young Adult*

## Recommendations

Enduring solutions to these complex social challenges will not be a one-size-fits-all approach and will require the participation of policymakers, employees, parents/guardians, employers, support providers and educators. These focus group conversations underscored the reality of intersectionality and the need to be mindful of how some solutions may be able to cut across various workforce challenges while others will address specific aspects. Indeed, the silos within and across sectors continue to lead to ineffective and inefficient systems at a time our economy desperately needs a strong workforce.

The challenges are great. However, creating real career options and pathways presents a unique opportunity for consensus in the face of so many other more divisive issues. Creating a society where people can build a good life is a common goal. There are concrete steps that most of us can take – some big and some small – to address our current crisis and to build a foundation for more stable and promising careers for future generations.

### **Policymakers:**

Many of the challenges facing young adults and others seeking employment are best addressed with state or federal government involvement. Focus group participants pointed to the following as top policy priorities.

- Affordable housing.
- Reliable and affordable transit.
- Affordable high-quality childcare.
- Affordable skills and educational attainment.

There are other more targeted policies that can help solve some workforce challenges, for example:

- Establish nationwide data sharing on wages to help job seekers, support providers, employers and others better understand opportunities within specific career pathways.
- Lower employment barriers for formerly incarcerated persons and those managing substance abuse (second-chance hiring).
- Greater opportunities for work-based learning.

### **Employers:**

Many focus group participants expressed a desire for more communication and flexibility from employers.

- Review existing standard operating procedures to identify opportunities for remote work and more flexible start/stop times.
- Provide clear paths for career growth and articulate them both while interviewing and during new hire training. Concretely describe milestones for career advancement, and, where possible, invest in employees through additional training and professional development.
- Review and update job descriptions, and, when possible, minimize barriers in the application and interview process:
- When possible and appropriate, consider alternatives to the traditional interview process to accommodate neurodivergent applicants. This can include providing questions in advance, altering the interview room environment, and/or using work sample tests rather than interviewing alone.

- Evaluate position requirements and remove those that may be unnecessary and block access (e.g., degree requirements when the position may not truly require one).
- Consider and adjust the unspoken expectations of interview behaviors that may not translate to an ability to do a specific job well (e.g., maintaining eye contact may not be essential to job duties and therefore not essential as an evaluation criterion in an interview).
- Clearly communicate your expectations and be open to listening to the needs of employees.
- Collaborate with current employees to foster a workplace culture of caring and connection.
- Train managers and higher-level workers on engaging with a younger workforce. Skill building is a two-way street, and those at upper levels have knowledge and skills to gain from those much earlier in their careers.
- Update/integrate mental health policies into the workplace including support for mental health first aid training for employees. Connect employees to resources for mental healthcare, childcare, transportation or other support they need to succeed in the workplace.

Employers create jobs and have many responsibilities for their firms and employees. Therefore, they also have a role to play with policymakers, educators and other employers in solving some of these workforce challenges.

- Engage in conversations about state and federal policy interventions that will make attracting and retaining talent easier, e.g., public transit options, affordable housing, childcare, etc.

- Collaborate with other local employers and service providers to provide career paths that might span different employers. A community-focused approach to cultivating the workforce will benefit all employers in a region.
- Engage with local schools and community colleges to provide job shadowing and other work-based learning opportunities such as apprenticeships and internships.

### **Support Providers, Including Educators:**

- Expose youth to career pathways early and often through many formats, including going to youth rather than only expecting them to come to you via job fairs, etc. Examples could be:
  - Traditional career fairs at untraditional places.
  - Site visits to local workplaces.
  - Job shadowing and work-based learning experiences.
  - “Reverse interviews,” where students ask questions of employers.
  - Social media.
- Work with employers to develop high-quality educational opportunities for in-demand skills and positions.
- Include employability skills in curriculum beginning in middle school through all postsecondary programs.
- Collaborate with other local support providers such as education, local government and social services. Collaborative strategies should focus on holistic approaches and where possible use an “opt out” approach instead of “opt in” to reach more young adults.
  - Asset-based career advising services, especially for youth and young adults.

- Connections to education/training/pre-apprenticeships for in-demand jobs with advancement opportunities, including help accessing financial assistance, if needed.
- Success coaches to help connect potential workers to wraparound support they may need.
- Expose young people to entrepreneurship as a career pathway and educate them on the promise and peril of the gig economy.
- Collaborate with other local organizations, including religious organizations, to help alleviate workforce challenges, primarily transportation, housing and childcare.
- Engage in regional conversations and solutions around the systemic challenges identified by workers: childcare, housing, transportation, etc.
- Consider identifying and promoting industry-valued short-term credentials that can be a starting point for local careers and provide an easier on-ramp, especially for opportunity youth.
- Find youth champions for your organizations and empower them to bring in others – many youth may follow their peers more than the adults around them
- Listen without judgment to the perspectives, priorities and preferences of young people
- Set goals. Give yourself grace to not always succeed the first time but to keep moving forward.
- Find a trusted adult – teacher, pastor, neighbor, parent, older sibling – who can help and champion you.

### **Young Adults and Other Jobseekers:**

- Communicate with your employer or potential employer about your needs and goals.
- Seek community resources that can help you learn more about your strengths and interests and connect you to workforce and education opportunities in your area.

## Acknowledgements

ncIMPACT Initiative at the UNC School of Government and NCGrowth at the Kenan Institute for of Private Enterprise thank the North Carolina Collaboratory for the partnership on this project and the generous funding to support the work. Additionally, we are grateful to the many community partners who helped make our focus groups possible, from locating space, to helping coordinate food, to inviting participants. Thank you for the thoughtfulness and energy you contributed to making these important conversations happen. We could not have done it without you. Finally, we are deeply grateful to the focus group participants themselves who took time out of their lives to tell us their stories. We hope we listened well to the perspectives you provided and to the challenges, concerns, ideas, experiences, and hopes you shared. Thank you for your trust and your honesty.

### Focus Group Sites

Alamance Community College (Graham, N.C.)

Bertie County Schools District Office (Windsor, N.C.)

Coastal Carolina Community College (Jacksonville, N.C.)

Columbus Regional Healthcare System (Whiteville, N.C.)

Columbus County Library (Whiteville, N.C.)

Cowee School Arts & Heritage Center (Franklin, N.C.)

Johnson C. Smith University (Charlotte, N.C.)

Wilson County Chamber of Commerce (Wilson, N.C.)

Wilson County Public Library (Wilson, N.C.)

The Industrial Commons (Morganton, N.C.)

## Appendix A. Methodology

One or two moderators and one notetaker were present during each focus group. Before joining the focus groups, participants provided consent to participate and be recorded (Appendix E, Consent Forms). The moderator introduced the goal of the focus groups – to better understand the challenges, changes and opportunities that COVID-19 brought to the labor market. Then, the moderator facilitated discussion using focus group guides (Appendix C, Focus Group Guides). While each focus group explored similar themes, questions varied slightly depending on the focus group population. Examples of questions asked during each focus group include:

- How has COVID-19 changed your experience with work?
- As an employer, do you feel as though your company/organization is well-suited to employ and train young adults? Why or why not?
- How has your community supported young people throughout the pandemic?
- What are the ideal characteristics and/or skills of a potential employee?
- How do you stay aware of young people's evolving interests and needs to ensure that your programs continue to align with their long-term goals?

Focus groups or interviews were recorded and were then transcribed using a transcription service (<https://www.rev.com>). Using focus group guides (Appendix A, Focus Group Guides) and notes from the first few focus groups, a team of MPH Capstone students who served as research assistants on this project initially listed potential codes, before eventually developing a codebook that would be used for the rest of the initial qualitative analysis. For the initial analysis, a matrix document was created in Excel. Research team members then read the focus group transcripts and identified quotes that exemplify the codes and put them in the corresponding cells.

Figure 1. Matrix Analysis Template

	Group	Code 1	Code 2	Code ...
County #	(OY/Employers/Service Provider)	Quote	Quote	Quote
County #	(OY/Employers/Service Provider)	Quote	Quote	Quote
County #	(OY/Employers/Service Provider)	Quote	Quote	Quote

After transcripts coding, research team members met to discuss coding questions and resolve coding discrepancies. During this initial round of analysis, the team coded transcripts from the young adult population in a qualitative analysis software (NVivo) that was then exported in matrix form. The codebook for this analysis is attached in the Appendix (Appendix B, Codebook) section of this report.

**Limitations**

The overarching goal of the focus groups was to learn about the challenges opportunity youth face regarding employment and education and how to reengage them. While the team was successful in recruiting employers and workforce support providers, it was consistently challenging to recruit youth to participate in the focus groups. Additional reflection on why it was so difficult to recruit opportunity youth is warranted, but the result is that the bulk of the qualitative data that was collected and analyzed comes from employers and support providers. These groups provided valuable information, but the lack of insights from the youth themselves limits the generalizability of the focus group findings to the target population.

It is also important to highlight that the intended audience for the focus group findings is the Carolina Across 100 project team and community collaboratives, particularly the 13 cross-sector teams involved in the “Our State, Our Work” initiative. As such, the focus group protocol was designed to specifically draw insights about what these counties and communities across North Carolina experience and see as

needs. Therefore, these findings are likely not generalizable to employers, youth and support providers from other states across the U.S., or even to counties in North Carolina that did not participate in the focus groups.

Before the start of the focus groups, each participant was asked to fill out a demographic survey. Two demographic surveys were used, one for opportunity youth and one for employers and support providers. See Appendix D for details on the focus group demographics.



## Appendix B. Codebook

No.	Codes	Description	Example
1	Difficulties in Hiring	Participants share challenges or difficulties they have in hiring employees.	"And in all of my time in this industry, this has been the worst from an employment standpoint. I think we interviewed – my tally was 650 people last year – and out of that 650 people, we hired 150. So the applicants are poor applicants, number one." (Wilson, Employers)
2	Impact of COVID	Participants discuss how COVID has affected work, whether negative or positive. Can be impacting work landscape, candidates, education, etc.	"I think COVID-19 for us was, well for everyone, was a test of resilience and sustainability. It really, I think, tested our systems." (Wilson, Employers)
3	Skills of Employees	Participants mention soft skills such as accountability, respect, timeliness, etc., or hard skills. This can be skills that they feel employees are lacking, skills they possess, or skills the employers are looking for.	"They don't make good eye contact. Their verbiage is not great. So it's a multitude of things." (Wilson, Employers)
4	Ideal Candidate Profile	Participants share characteristics that they are looking for in an employee, can be specific or general .	"For us in manufacturing, that swings broadly. If we're hiring just general labor, what we would like to have would be someone with a high school diploma that has soft skills already preembedded in their DNA and just wants to show up every day on time and put an honest day of work in. That just doesn't exist anymore. That's my ideal candidate and we'll go through 10 to get one. And I do not think that's an exaggeration" (Wilson, Employers)
5	Current Candidate Profile	Participants share the of employees characteristics (often focusing on those that are missing) that they see upon recruiting, meeting, interacting, or interviewing.	"Social skills, really bad. Not always really bad, but we want to provide amazing service and when ... Something that we do often is drop a pen on the floor near the table just to see if the applicant will pick it up or if they wait for you to pick it up. And to me, that's a big in indicator of what their level of willingness to serve others is. They don't make good eye contact. Their verbiage is not great. So it's a multitude of things" (Wilson, Employers)
6	The Changing Work Landscapes	Participants discuss how work has shifted over time – include changes that have been accelerated by COVID and changes not related to COVID.	"Yeah, I think COVID definitely had an impact on that, but I think the tide was already changing. We were already tighter than we'd ever been, but COVID just really pushed it to a different level." (Wilson, Employers)
6a	Shift in Leverages	Participants share how employees can use certain changes in the work landscape to their benefit (i.e., remote work)	"Yeah, I think it's much higher on the side of the employee than it's ever been. Previously, terms like wages and benefits were really the only leverage that an employee had. Now to Christie's point, it's when I work, it's the conditions in which I work, it's whether I work on location or remotely. So there's a lot more variables at play than there ever has been. And again, I feel like prospective employees and current employees can leverage those things much more than they've ever been in the past." (Wilson, Employers)

7	Employee Retention	Participants discuss the difficulties they have seen with high turnover with their employees (example: power imbalances, differences in expectations)	“So I would say pre-COVID, our business was pretty steady from a revenue side and our retention rate was high, so we didn’t do a lot of hiring. We would hire, but the numbers were drastically different now than prior to COVID. It has nothing to do with COVID, it’s just contract driven. Since ... and I don’t know what date you say you put COVID-19, as far as I’m concerned it’s still going on, but over the last year and, say, a half, we’ve started expanding our business a great deal. So we’ve been going through a lot more applications. We hire through temp services more times than not for our factory floor because, to echo what Christie said, more don’t work out than do, and it’s just easier to process through the system this way.” (Wilson, Employers)
8	Mental Health	Participants discussed the mental wellness of employers/employees and mental resources available/unavailable in the workplace (burnout, etc.)	“We saw a huge increase after COVID started amongst the teenagers. Just being out of school, things being different, they had a lot of ... We had several crises. During the span of COVID, we had three team members that were hospitalized because of mental health issues. I’ve never had that. I mean, I’ve never had anybody hospitalized for mental health issues in my whole career. And now I’ve got three within an 18-month period. I mean, COVID definitely did something to that age group.” (Wilson, Employers)
9	Supporting Employees	Participants discussed what support employees need, what support employers provide, workforce support organizations, what support is available from family or community, and what support is missing	“Something that ... I don’t know how significant it’s been, but we have added a sick pay policy now onto what we had, which we never had before. So now we’ve got how they can earn sick pay. And we’ve just done a lot of little stuff for them. Pizza parties, bringing in cookies and doughnuts. We closed our play lands up because they weren’t safe for kids to be in during COVID. I still don’t think they are, but we put a snack bar in there with Red Bulls, and chips, and cookies, and we did that. We are just starting to wean off the snack bars because people keep asking for bigger uniforms. So maybe they don’t need the snack bar any longer. But we did a lot of just kind of feel-good things for them.” (Wilson, Employers)
10	Workplace Culture	Participants defined workplace culture, an ideal workplace environment (example: workplace is flexible) and how workplace culture can be shaped by certain beliefs, values and biases	“Well we’ve seen more call-outs. We’ve also seen a lot of people, instead of calling out too, they’re asking to work from home. We try to be flexible about that. There are some policies that HR has kind of developed for positions based on scheduling and stuff, but it’s kind of hard with hourly employees.” (Wilson, Employers)
11	Employee Challenges	Participants share barriers/challenges that employees may face around work (transportation, childcare, etc.)	“We did 8,000-plus during COVID, and what we saw differently was the same people that are impacted by poor education or they’re uninsured or not able to pay for their bills are the same people that’s having issues with transportation and having issues with finding someone to babysit their child with school being out.” (Wilson, Employers)
11a	Bias in the Workplace	Participants share challenges/biases that they face because of cultural differences that can be due to, but not limited to: racial, generational, national, or previously different workplace.	“I do think to myself, I understand the work from home. I understand folks earning incomes through ways in which I don’t necessarily understand because I’m not of that generation, but there’s still a component of I got to go eat, and sometimes I don’t want to cook, so I need to go to Chick-fil-A, and you got to get healthcare. So how are we going to do that if the focus is all this virtual environment? And there’s been movement in the healthcare space, and we were already ready. But there’s still a component of human connection, and I just feel like with the younger generations, it’s just not as high of a priority, or whatever.” (Wilson, Employers)

12	Solutions/ Opportunities	Participants suggest potential solution to solve various issues related to employment shortage, education lapse and other things related to this topic	“For employers, I would say not to minimize the objective things that they need to do to compete for employees. They obviously need to pay a living wage and benefits are important. But I would suggest that maybe employees, prospective employees, care as much about being cared for, having ownership in what they’re doing, having a mission and a purpose behind what they’re doing, having that explained to them as they’re onboarded into the organization, I think is as important.”
13	Good Quotes/ Narratives	Apply code to compelling quotes, narratives or vignettes that are poignant or particularly good representations of themes.	

**Rules:**

- 1. ALLOW MULTIPLE CODES (DOUBLE CODE, OR MORE)**
- 2. CODE IN FULL SENTENCES**
- 3. ERR ON THE SIDE OF CODING LARGER LENGTHS OF TEXT IN ORDER TO PROVIDE CONTEXT**

## Appendix C. Data Collection Instruments

### Employer Focus Group Guide

#### Facilitator Script

##### Welcome and Overview (5 minutes)

Welcome, everyone! Thank you so much for being willing to participate in today's focus group. My name is \_\_\_\_\_, my pronouns are \_\_\_\_\_, and I will be facilitating today's conversation. The main goal for today is to hear about your experiences as employers in the state of North Carolina and how COVID-19 has affected you. We'll ask a series of questions that will allow you to share personal stories, experiences, and perspectives as it relates to being an employer. Our hope is that today's discussion will inform and improve employment opportunities offered throughout North Carolina.

We are hosting focus groups like this one all throughout the state. Once complete, we'll write a report on what you, and other participants, have shared with us. While we're going to ask you some specific questions, please know that everything you share here today is private. We will not repeat any personal information you share, and we will not include your names or any identifying information in the report. We believe your thoughts and experiences are incredibly important and we are grateful that you've chosen to participate today.

##### Introductions (10 minutes)

Today's session will last about an hour. Before we get started, let's share our first names and your organization or business. I'll start: Like I said earlier, my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I \_\_\_\_\_.

*Pause for participants to introduce themselves.*

It's nice to meet you all! Thank you for sharing. Before we begin, we'll cover some ground rules and group norms for today's conversation.

##### Focus Group Ground Rules and Group Norms:

*Ground Rules and Group Norms should be read aloud by the facilitator and posted for reference in the meeting room. The facilitator should point out where the ground rules/group norms are listed.*

- 1. WHAT IS SAID IN THE FOCUS GROUP STAYS IN THE FOCUS GROUP. EVERYONE'S RESPONSES ARE CONFIDENTIAL.**
- 2. LISTEN TO ONE ANOTHER AND SPEAK ONE AT A TIME.**
- 3. TREAT ONE ANOTHER WITH KINDNESS; IT IS OK TO DISAGREE AND SHARE YOUR OWN OPINION, BUT WE WANT EVERYONE TO FEEL COMFORTABLE SHARING THEIR THOUGHTS. THERE ARE NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS.**
- 4. WE WANT TO HEAR FROM EVERYONE. FOR THE SAKE OF TIME, AND SO THAT WE CAN COVER ALL OF TODAY'S QUESTIONS, THE FACILITATOR MAY REDIRECT THE CONVERSATION OR ASK OTHERS TO SHARE THEIR THOUGHTS.**
- 5. YOUR PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY. YOU DO NOT HAVE TO ANSWER ANY QUESTIONS YOU DO NOT WANT TO ANSWER, AND YOU ARE WELCOME TO LEAVE AT ANY TIME.**

- 6. WE WILL BE RECORDING TODAY'S CONVERSATION. WE WANT TO CAPTURE EVERYTHING YOU HAVE TO SAY. EVERYTHING YOU SHARE WILL REMAIN ANONYMOUS. IF YOU DO NOT WANT TO BE RECORDED, PLEASE SAY SO NOW.**

Any questions before we get started?

#### **Reaction to Data (10 minutes)**

*Data will be presented either on individual handouts or will be easily viewed within the room.*

What stands out to you about this data? Does anything surprise you?

Are there aspects of your life that are not captured in this list of data? What else should be included?

#### **Questions for Discussion**

#### **COVID-19 and Employer Experience (15 minutes)**

- 1. HOW HAS COVID-19 CHANGED YOUR EXPERIENCE AS AN EMPLOYER?**
- 2. WHAT DO YOU WISH FELLOW NORTH CAROLINIANS KNEW ABOUT THESE EXPERIENCES?**
- 3. HOW HAS COVID-19 IMPACTED THE WORKFORCE READINESS OF POTENTIAL EMPLOYEES?**
- 4. HOW HAS COVID-19 IMPACTED THE LABOR MARKET? WHAT IMPACTS HAVE BEEN POSITIVE? WHAT IMPACTS HAVE BEEN NEGATIVE?**
- 5. HAVE YOU FELT PREPARED TO MEET THE NEEDS OF YOUR EMPLOYEES THROUGHOUT THE PANDEMIC? WHY OR WHY NOT?**

- 6. HOW HAS COVID-19 CHANGED YOUR EXPECTATIONS FOR EMPLOYEES?**

#### **Employer Beliefs and Values (10 minutes)**

- 1. DESCRIBE THE IDEAL CHARACTERISTICS AND/OR SKILLS OF A POTENTIAL EMPLOYEE.**
- 2. AS AN EMPLOYER, WHAT MOTIVATES YOU EACH DAY? WHY?**
- 3. HOW DO YOU DEFINE SUCCESS IN A JOB OR CAREER?**
- 4. WHAT DO YOU THINK OF WHEN YOU ENVISION AN IDEAL WORK ENVIRONMENT?**

#### **Opportunity Youth and Employers (25 minutes)**

As mentioned earlier, we are hosting a series of focus groups throughout the state. One population who has been involved in these focus groups are opportunity youth. Opportunity youth are young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 who are not currently employed or in school. We hope the next portion of today's discussion will inform and improve employment opportunities offered to opportunity youth throughout North Carolina.

As an employer, do you feel as though your company/ organization is well-suited to employ and train young adults? Why or why not?

#### **Optional:**

- 1. WHAT TOOLS OR RESOURCES WOULD HELP YOU FEEL MORE PREPARED TO WORK WITH YOUNG EMPLOYEES?**

- 2. HOW MIGHT YOUR CURRENT HIRING POLICIES OR PRACTICES PRESENT BARRIERS TO OPPORTUNITY YOUTH SEEKING EMPLOYMENT (I.E., PRACTICES RELATED TO CRIMINAL OFFENDER RECORD INFORMATION (CORI) CHECKS, COLLEGE DEGREE REQUIREMENTS FOR POSITIONS WHERE A DEGREE IS NOT NEEDED)? \*\***
- 3. HOW HAS YOUR BUSINESS OR ORGANIZATION SUPPORTED YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGHOUT THE PANDEMIC?**
- 4. WHAT IS ONE THING YOUNG PEOPLE REALLY NEED IN YOUR COMMUNITY BUT DON'T HAVE?**
- 5. HOW CAN YOU WORK WITH INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND/OR SERVICE PROVIDERS TO OFFER PAID INTERNSHIPS TO OPPORTUNITY YOUTH?**
- 6. COULD THESE INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCES LEAD TO FULL-TIME JOB OPPORTUNITIES? \*\***
- 7. WHAT ARE THE MOST NECESSARY SOFT AND HARD SKILLS YOUNG ADULTS NEED FOR EMPLOYMENT?**
- 8. IF PROVIDED WITH THE NECESSARY RESOURCES AND SUPPORT, IS YOUR COMPANY/ ORGANIZATION WILLING TO TEACH THESE SKILLS TO POTENTIAL YOUNG EMPLOYEES?**

**Conclusion (5 minutes)**

- 1. IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE OR DISCUSS THAT I HAVEN'T YET ASKED YOU ABOUT?**
- 2. WHAT IS ONE QUESTION I DIDN'T ASK BUT NEXT TIME I SHOULD?**

Thank you all so much for coming today and for taking the time to share your thoughts and experiences. We are so grateful to hear from each of you. Your perspectives are integral to this study. Before you go, would you please fill out this short demographic survey? It is completely anonymous. The survey contains an optional section asking if you'd be willing to participate in a 30–45-minute follow-up interview. If you found today's conversation helpful or enjoyable, we would appreciate it if you agreed to have a team member reach out to schedule an interview sometime soon.

*\*\*This element of the focus group guide was adapted from the following report: Career Pathways for Opportunity Youth Report (2019)*

## **Service Provider Focus Group Guide**

### **Facilitator Script**

#### **Welcome and Overview (5 minutes)**

Welcome, everyone! Thank you so much for being willing to participate in today's focus group. My name is \_\_\_\_\_, my pronouns are \_\_\_\_\_, and I will be facilitating today's conversation. The main goal for today is to hear about your experiences as service providers in the state of North Carolina and how COVID-19 has affected you. We'll ask a series of questions that will allow you to share personal stories, experiences, and perspectives as it relates to being a service provider. Our hope is that today's discussion will inform and improve community resources and employment opportunities offered throughout North Carolina.

We are hosting focus groups like this one all throughout the state. Once complete, we'll write a report on what you, and other participants, have shared with us. While we're going to ask you some specific questions, please know that everything you share here today is private. We will not repeat any personal information you share, and we

will not include your names or any identifying information in the report. We believe your thoughts and experiences are incredibly important and we are grateful that you've chosen to participate today.

### Introductions (10 minutes)

Today's session will last about an hour and a half. Before we get started, let's share our first names, our pronouns, and how we heard about today's session. If you're not comfortable sharing your name, that's fine. You're welcome to choose a different name if you'd like. I'll start: Like I said earlier, my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I heard about today's session through \_\_\_\_\_.

*Pause for participants to introduce themselves.*

It's nice to meet you all! Thank you for sharing. Before we begin, we'll cover some ground rules and group norms for today's conversation.

### Focus Group Ground Rules and Group Norms:

*Ground Rules and Group Norms should be read aloud by the facilitator and posted for reference in the meeting room. The facilitator should point out where the ground rules/group norms are listed.*

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- 3. TREAT ONE ANOTHER WITH KINDNESS; IT IS OK TO DISAGREE AND SHARE YOUR OWN OPINION, BUT WE WANT EVERYONE TO FEEL COMFORTABLE SHARING THEIR THOUGHTS. THERE ARE NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS.**

- 4. WE WANT TO HEAR FROM EVERYONE. FOR THE SAKE OF TIME, AND SO THAT WE CAN COVER ALL OF TODAY'S QUESTIONS, THE FACILITATOR MAY REDIRECT THE CONVERSATION OR ASK OTHERS TO SHARE THEIR THOUGHTS.**
- 5. YOUR PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY. YOU DO NOT HAVE TO ANSWER ANY QUESTIONS YOU DO NOT WANT TO ANSWER, AND YOU ARE WELCOME TO LEAVE AT ANY TIME.**
- 6. WE WILL BE RECORDING TODAY'S CONVERSATION. WE WANT TO CAPTURE EVERYTHING YOU HAVE TO SAY. EVERYTHING YOU SHARE WILL REMAIN ANONYMOUS. IF YOU DO NOT WANT TO BE RECORDED, PLEASE SAY SO NOW.**

### Reaction to Data (10 minutes)

*Data will be presented either on individual handouts or will be easily viewed within the room.*

- 1. WHAT STANDS OUT TO YOU ABOUT THIS DATA? DOES ANYTHING SURPRISE YOU?**
- 2. ARE THERE ASPECTS OF YOUR LIFE THAT ARE NOT CAPTURED IN THIS LIST OF DATA? WHAT ELSE SHOULD BE INCLUDED?**

### Questions for Discussion

#### COVID-19 and Service Provider Experience (15 minutes)

- 1. HOW HAS COVID-19 CHANGED YOUR EXPERIENCE AS A SERVICE PROVIDER?**
- 2. WHAT DO YOU WISH FELLOW NORTH CAROLINIANS KNEW ABOUT THESE EXPERIENCES?**

- 3. HOW HAS COVID-19 IMPACTED YOUR CLIENT BASE?**
- 4. HOW HAS COVID-19 IMPACTED RESOURCE PROVISION? WHAT IMPACTS HAVE BEEN POSITIVE? WHAT IMPACTS HAVE BEEN NEGATIVE?**
- 5. HAVE YOU FELT PREPARED TO MEET THE NEEDS OF YOUR CLIENTS THROUGHOUT THE PANDEMIC? WHY OR WHY NOT?**
- 6. HOW HAS COVID-19 CHANGED YOUR EXPECTATIONS FOR CLIENTS?**

**Service Provider Beliefs and Values (10 minutes)**

- 1. WHAT ARE THE STRENGTHS OF YOUR ORGANIZATION? WHAT ARE AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT? \*\***
- 2. AS A SERVICE PROVIDER, WHAT MOTIVATES YOU EACH DAY? WHY?**
- 3. HOW DO YOU DEFINE SUCCESS IN YOUR ROLE?**
- 4. HOW DO YOU IDENTIFY AND ENGAGE WITH EXTERNAL PARTNERS (I.E., OTHER SERVICE PROVIDERS, BUSINESSES, EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS, ETC.)? \*\***
- 5. HOW MIGHT YOU FORM AND LEVERAGE PARTNERSHIPS TO BETTER PROVIDE SERVICES FOR YOUR CLIENTS?**

**Opportunity Youth and Employers (25 minutes)**

As mentioned earlier, we are hosting a series of focus groups throughout the state. One population who has been involved in these focus groups are opportunity youth. Opportunity youth are young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 who are not currently employed or in school. We hope the next portion of today's discussion will inform and improve employment opportunities offered to opportunity youth throughout North Carolina.

As a service provider, do you feel as though your organization is well-suited to train and support young adults to seek living wage employment or educational opportunities? Why or why not?

**Optional:**

- 1. WHAT TOOLS OR RESOURCES WOULD HELP YOU FEEL MORE PREPARED TO SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE?**
- 2. HOW MIGHT YOUR ORGANIZATION'S CURRENT POLICIES OR PRACTICES PRESENT BARRIERS TO OPPORTUNITY YOUTH SEEKING EMPLOYMENT OR EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT?**
- 3. HOW HAS YOUR ORGANIZATION SUPPORTED YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGHOUT THE PANDEMIC?**
- 4. WHAT IS ONE THING YOUNG PEOPLE REALLY NEED IN YOUR COMMUNITY BUT DON'T HAVE?**
- 5. HOW DO YOU STAY AWARE OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S EVOLVING INTERESTS AND NEEDS TO ENSURE THAT YOUR PROGRAM CONTINUES TO ALIGN WITH THEIR LONG-TERM GOALS? \*\***
- 6. HOW DO YOU PROVIDE LONG-TERM SUPPORT TO YOUNG PEOPLE, EVEN AFTER THEY'VE COMPLETED A SPECIFIC REENGAGEMENT PROGRAM?**



7. **WHAT ARE THE MOST NECESSARY SOFT AND HARD SKILLS YOUNG ADULTS NEED FOR SUCCESS?**
8. **WHAT ARE THE THREE MAIN SKILLS YOUR ORGANIZATION EQUIPS YOUNG ADULTS WITH?**
9. **HOW DO YOU RECRUIT YOUNG PEOPLE WHO WILL BENEFIT FROM THE SERVICES YOUR ORGANIZATION PROVIDES?**

**Conclusion (5 minutes)**

1. **IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE OR DISCUSS THAT I HAVEN'T YET ASKED YOU ABOUT?**
2. **WHAT IS ONE QUESTION I DIDN'T ASK BUT NEXT TIME I SHOULD?**

Thank you all so much for coming today and for taking the time to share your thoughts and experiences. We are so grateful to hear from each of you. Your perspectives are integral to this study. Before you go, would you please fill out this short demographic survey? It is completely anonymous. The survey contains an optional section asking if you'd be willing to participate in a 30–45-minute follow-up interview. If you found today's conversation helpful or enjoyable, we would appreciate it if you agreed to have a team member reach out to schedule an interview sometime soon.

*\*\*This element of the focus group guide was adapted from the following report: Career Pathways for Opportunity Youth Report (2019)*

## **Opportunity Youth Focus Group Guide**

### **Facilitator Script**

#### **Welcome and Overview (5 minutes)**

Welcome, everyone! Thank you so much for being willing to participate in today's focus group. My name is \_\_\_\_\_, my pronouns are \_\_\_\_\_, and I will be facilitating today's conversation. The main goal for today is to hear about your experiences with work and school and how COVID-19 has affected you. We'll ask a series of questions that will allow you to share personal stories, experiences, and perspectives as it relates to being an opportunity youth. As a reminder, we define opportunity youth as an individual who is between the ages of 18 to 24 and who is not currently employed or in school. Our hope is that today's discussion will inform and improve employment and education opportunities offered to individuals aged 18-24 throughout North Carolina.

We are hosting focus groups like this one all throughout the state. Once complete, we'll write a report on what you, and other participants, have shared with us. While we're going to ask you some specific questions, please know that everything you share here today is private. We will not repeat any personal information you share, and we will not include your names or any identifying information in the report. We believe your thoughts and experiences are incredibly important and we are grateful that you've chosen to participate today.

#### **Introductions (10 minutes)**

As we're talking today, feel free to use the pipe cleaners on the table as a fidget device. Today's session will last about an hour and a half. Before we get started, let's share our first names, our pronouns, and how we heard about today's session. If you're not comfortable sharing your name, that's fine. You're welcome to choose a different name if you'd like. I'll start: Like I said earlier, my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I heard about today's session through \_\_\_\_\_.

*Pause for participants to introduce themselves.*

It's nice to meet you all! Thank you for sharing. Before we begin, we'll cover some ground rules and group norms for today's conversation.

### **Focus Group Ground Rules and Group Norms:**

*Ground Rules and Group Norms should be read aloud by the facilitator and posted for reference in the meeting room. The facilitator should point out where the ground rules/group norms are listed.*

- 1. WHAT IS SAID IN THE FOCUS GROUP STAYS IN THE FOCUS GROUP. EVERYONE'S RESPONSES ARE CONFIDENTIAL.**
- 2. LISTEN TO ONE ANOTHER AND SPEAK ONE AT A TIME.**
- 3. TREAT ONE ANOTHER WITH KINDNESS; IT IS OK TO DISAGREE AND SHARE YOUR OWN OPINION BUT WE WANT EVERYONE TO FEEL COMFORTABLE SHARING THEIR THOUGHTS. THERE ARE NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS.**
- 4. WE WANT TO HEAR FROM EVERYONE. FOR THE SAKE OF TIME, AND SO THAT WE ARE ABLE TO COVER ALL OF TODAY'S QUESTIONS, THE FACILITATOR MAY REDIRECT THE CONVERSATION OR ASK OTHERS TO SHARE THEIR THOUGHTS.**

**5. YOUR PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY. YOU DO NOT HAVE TO ANSWER ANY QUESTIONS YOU DO NOT WANT TO ANSWER AND YOU ARE WELCOME TO LEAVE AT ANY TIME.**

**6. WE WILL BE RECORDING TODAY'S CONVERSATION. WE WANT TO CAPTURE EVERYTHING YOU HAVE TO SAY. EVERYTHING YOU SHARE WILL REMAIN ANONYMOUS. IF YOU DO NOT WANT TO BE RECORDED, PLEASE SAY SO NOW.**

Any questions before we get started?

### **Reaction to Data (10 minutes)**

*Data will be presented either on individual handouts or will be easily viewed within the room.*

- What stands out to you about this data? Does anything surprise you?
- Are there aspects of your life that are not captured in this list of data? What else should be included?

### **Questions for Discussion**

#### **Daily Life/Community (15 minutes)**

- What is the primary way COVID-19 has impacted your daily life?
- How has your community supported young people throughout the pandemic? or How does your community support young people?
- What is one thing young people really need in your community but don't have?

- What is one goal you have for your life? Who have you told about your goal?
- If you want to go back to school or get a job, who can help you?
- What motivates you each day? Why?

### School (15 minutes)

- How has COVID-19 changed your experience with school (high school, college, or both)? If you weren't in school during the pandemic, think about how it changed for anyone you knew that was in school. \*\*\*
  - What do you wish teachers, professors, or other school staff knew about these experiences?
- What hesitations do you have, if any, about going back to school? \*\*\*
  - What barriers, if any, keep you from going back to school?
- How do you define success in school?
- What is your proudest moment from school?
- What aspects of schooling do you enjoy? What aspects of schooling are frustrating?

### Work (15 minutes)

- How has COVID-19 changed your experience with work? If you weren't working during the pandemic, think about how it changed for anyone you knew that was working.
- What makes a job or career meaningful and fulfilling?
- What hesitations do you have, if any, about going back to work?

- What barriers, if any, keep you from going back to work?
- When considering a job or a career, what expectations do you have for your employer?
- Are there certain jobs or industries you wish you had easier access to?
- What do you think of when you envision an ideal work environment?
- How do you define success in a job or career?
- How has COVID-19 made it harder for you (or people you know) to keep a job? \*\*\*
  - What do you wish employers knew about these experiences? \*\*\*
- What was your dream job as a child? What is your dream job now?

### Conclusion (5 minutes)

- Is there anything else you would like to share or discuss that I haven't yet asked you about?
- What is one question I didn't ask but next time I should?

Thank you all so much for coming today and for taking the time to share your thoughts and experiences. We are so grateful to hear from each of you. Your perspectives are integral to this study. Before you go, would you please fill out this short demographic survey? It is completely anonymous. The survey contains an optional section asking if you'd be willing to participate in a 30–45-minute follow-up interview. If you found today's conversation helpful or enjoyable, we would appreciate it if you agreed to have a team member reach out to schedule an interview sometime soon.

*\*\*This element of the focus group guide was adapted from the following report: Cultivating Opportunities for Youth to Flourish in Franklin County (2020).*

*\*\*\*This element of the focus group guide was adapted from the following report: Southeast Pennsylvania Opportunity Youth Study: Understanding & Responding to the Impacts of the Pandemic (2022).*

### Demographic Survey (for Young Adults)

**1. WHICH RACE/ETHNICITY BEST DESCRIBES YOU?  
SELECT ONE.**

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander
- Other
- Two or more races/ethnicities
- White
- Prefer not to answer

**2. WITH WHICH GENDER(S) DO YOU MOST IDENTIFY?  
CHECK ALL THAT APPLY.**

- Female
- Male
- Nonbinary

- Prefer not to answer
- None of the above

**3. HOW OLD ARE YOU? \_\_\_\_\_**

**4. WHAT LANGUAGE DO YOU SPEAK AT HOME?**

- English
- Spanish
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to answer

**5. WHAT IS YOUR ZIP CODE? \_\_\_\_\_**

**6. WHAT IS THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION YOU  
HAVE COMPLETED?**

- Less than high school
- High school graduate or equivalent (e.g., GED)
- Some college, no degree
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's degree or higher
- Prefer not to answer

**7. ARE YOU CURRENTLY WORKING (FULL TIME OR  
PART TIME) OR IN SCHOOL?**

- No, I'm not working or in school
- Yes, I'm working

- Yes, I'm in school
- Yes, I'm both working and in school

**Demographic Survey (for Employers and Workforce Support Providers)**

**1. WHICH RACE/ETHNICITY BEST DESCRIBES YOU?  
SELECT ONE.**

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander
- Other
- Two or more races/ethnicities
- White
- Prefer not to answer

**2. WITH WHICH GENDER(S) DO YOU MOST IDENTIFY?  
CHECK ALL THAT APPLY.**

- Female
- Male
- Nonbinary
- Prefer not to answer
- None of the above

**3. HOW OLD ARE YOU? \_\_\_\_\_**

**4. WHAT LANGUAGE DO YOU SPEAK AT HOME?**

- English
- Spanish
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to answer

**5. WHAT IS YOUR ZIP CODE? \_\_\_\_\_**

**6. WHAT IS THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION YOU  
HAVE COMPLETED?**

- Less than high school
- High school graduate or equivalent (e.g., GED)
- Some college, no degree
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's degree or higher
- Prefer not to answer

**7. ARE YOU AN EMPLOYER OR A WORKFORCE  
SUPPORT PROVIDER?**

- Employer (Sector type: \_\_\_\_\_)
- Workforce Support Provider (Organization type: \_\_\_\_\_)
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D. Consent Form

### University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Consent to Participate in a Research Study

#### Adult Participants

**Consent Form Version Date: 11.10.2022**

**IRB Study # 22-1618**

#### **Title of Study: Where Are the Workers: Understanding the Post-COVID Labor Shortage**

The purpose of this research study is to better understand the impacts of COVID-19 on the challenges, changes, and opportunities that young adult workers, employers, and employment support providers are experiencing. Study participants will take part in a community-based focus group that will allow them to share their perspectives and experiences. The aim of this study is to improve the programs, services, and resources for workers and employers.

If you agree to participate, you will participate in a 60-90 minute focus group conversation. Questions asked during the focus group will incorporate recent data on employment and the workforce but will prioritize the thoughts and stories of participants. At the time of the focus group, participants will fill out a short survey that will collect information like age, race/ethnicity, gender, where they are currently living, and other characteristics.

Participating in this focus group is completely voluntary. You may choose not to participate, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty. Deciding not to be in the study or leaving the study before it is done will not affect your relationship with the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) in any way.

Though unlikely, potential risks associated with our study could include emotional distress or embarrassment among participants and the risk of a breach in confidentiality. However, we will do our best to ensure that doesn't happen and we will remind participants not to share information about the focus group conversations with others outside of these sessions.

We will be tape recording these conversations so that we capture all the things you share with us. The audio recordings will be transcribed by a professional transcription company and the recordings will be kept on a secure file sharing system at UNC-CH for up to 12 months.

Participants will not be identified in any report or publication about this study; however, we may use direct quotes without using any names in the attribution. We may use de-identified data from this study in future research without additional consent. Any personally identifying data collected and received throughout the study will be stored separately from focus group data. All data collected will be stored on password-protected computers and secure file servers. Any individually identifiable data will only be accessible to the research team.

For more information about this study or if you have any questions, you may contact [ADD NAME AND CONTACT INFORMATION].

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject you may contact the UNC-CH Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 or IRB\_subjects@unc.edu.

#### **Check the line that best matches your choice:**

OK to record me during the study

Not OK to record me during the study

## Appendix E. Sample Recruitment Flyer

# Where are the Workers?

The ncIMPACT Initiative and NCGrowth (both at UNC Chapel Hill) are hosting focus groups around the state to hear from local **employers, employment support providers, and young adults** about the challenges and opportunities they face in the current labor market.

Volunteer to come share your perspective with us!

Join us for  
conversations in:

County, specific  
location and date



### WHO WE ARE TALKING TO

- **Local employers** representing a variety of sectors and business sizes
- **Employment support providers** (e.g., workforce boards, community colleges, k-12 reps, community-based organizations)
- **Young adults** (ages 18+ who are not working or in school or were recently unemployed)

SCAN QR  
CODE TO  
REGISTER



For more information, please  
contact Jess Dorrance:

[dorrance@sog.unc.edu](mailto:dorrance@sog.unc.edu)

# Appendix F. Demographic Data

Provide designer with source data to create graphics.



## Appendix G. Expanded Quote Listing and Additional Topics

As we mention in the main report, we have focused this report on some of the themes that emerged most prominently as well as topics that seem to hold the greatest potential for solutions. However, it felt important to offer more of our participants' own words, their wide-ranging insights, as well as an expanded listing of quotes on our existing thematic analysis and reporting.

### Barriers to employment

*"But they can't stop working to come and take a class. ... So it's a slippery slope. And our classes are free. We don't charge anything for them to come and take our classes, and we provide supplies, we pay for the examination, we pay for the class, everything. But finding people that want to come in and take the class, and be willing to risk those hours, losing them on that second-shift or part-time job, is hard. Because that's how they pay their bills. And we know that once you go through the class, we can make you more marketable and more career-ready, but we've got to get you to go through it, and make sure that you're able to sustain yourself while you're going through it to narrow that wage gap and increase your economic mobility." — Workforce Support, Mecklenburg County*

### Changing attitudes toward work

*"But I think a difference in motivation is a definite concern and issue that needs to be addressed. I think it's going to take some different approaches. I know Ginger spoke about gaming being important, that goes to that work-life balance and things like that. But really identifying what is the motivator behind what people are. ... I'm a large fellow, so you know diets have been a part of my life. It's that whole eat to live versus live to eat. It's the same thing with work now. Is it live to work or is it work to live? I think that especially our younger generation, they've had their mortality thrown right in their face as we sit here in masks. And they're looking and saying, 'Wait a minute, am I working to*

*live or living to work?' I mean, nobody's giving out gold watches anymore. You cannot depend on committing to a company for 20-30 years and being taken care of, and having to look into that future. They're wanting their future now." — Workforce Support, Columbus County*

### Mental health

*"I call them the big three social concerns that we have: mental health/mental illnesses, substance use and domestic violence. Those three areas, if we're looking at those, I think we have to address those before we can even hope to get someone into a job and think they're going to perform at a stable, steady pace." — Workforce Support, Wilson County*

*"The lack of mental health resources availability and the urgency, especially for children that have extreme behavioral and emotional needs. I would say that's a huge area that we're really, really behind on." — Workforce Support, Wilson County*

*"We saw a huge increase after COVID started amongst the teenagers. Just being out of school, things being different, they had a lot of ... we had several crises. During the span of COVID, we had three team members that were hospitalized because of mental health issues. I've never had that. I mean, I've never had anybody hospitalized for mental health issues in my whole career. And now I've got three within an 18-month period. I mean, COVID definitely did something to that age group." — Employer, Wilson County*

*"I have something very similar. So, like I said, I work with Job Corps, but I work with all four of the Job Corps centers in North Carolina. So, a trend that we have seen, especially after the pandemic, is that a lot of our students are coming in with more mental health diagnoses. And so, it's really causing, where we are supposed to work on those soft skills and employability skills, stuff like that, they're way quicker to either just drop out or there's more behavioral problems because they have been more isolated." — Workforce Support, Macon County*

*“We had an employer that had an employee commit suicide, and he was talking to him on the phone at work when he shot himself. And so, these employers are dealing with a lot, and I think they need help and they need support, and they need some education, because this is what we’re dealing with.” — Workforce Support, Macon County*

*“And this doesn’t have anything to do with the pandemic per se, but there’s more and more kids coming up with trauma and they’re not learning in school because they’re fighting just to be able to survive. And I was in a meeting today, some school people, and it’s K through fourth grade is the grades they’re having the worst time in. And so, these people are coming on to go into the workforce and we’re not going to get any better because the trauma that these kids went through and then when they were at home, the homes that they were in, I mean, they’re all dealing with trauma. So, their thinking process, their maturing process, has all been slowed way down. And the lack of mental health services is not going to get any better until that gets better, until something happens to help these kids with trauma.” — Workforce Support, Macon County*

*“This all goes into the mental health bucket. But whenever you pick up your phone and the first thing you see is an alert that there was a mass shooting at Walmart or at Target or wherever ... My daughter, she’s 20 years old, she doesn’t want to go to the grocery store or Target by herself because what if something happens?” — Employer, Columbus County*

*“So, we saw an increase and we talked about it, about how mental health issues were on a rise after COVID where people were detrimental. I’m a preacher. Last year, I did, what, four funerals in a month and a half of young people?” — Workforce Support, Columbus County*

## **Issues of trust for youth**

*And I think some of our opportunity youth through their life, whether it’s home life, school life, wherever they found that person or that place that really meant something to them, they were let down somehow. So, I don’t trust the world anymore. So why would I go invest back into the world of work when I’m just going to be banged around again for a measly \$12 an hour? — Workforce Support, Wilson County*

*“These young people, they’re different. Like you said, culturally, they’re different. And they’ve been hardened, due to no fault of their own. The things they see on TV, that they have to witness. The music that they listen to. Even when they leave our homes... they still go out into the world and they’ve got friends, and they have phones and their own things. So, they’re hardened. And so, when you tell them, ‘Well, no, you’re not doing that right,’ you can’t rebuke them because they already have a wall up, you’re an authority figure already. So, they’re already going to be coming at you with their chest out and now you’re coming at them pointing a finger. And so, you want these young people to show up to work and stay and keep coming? Treat them like an adult.” — Workforce Support, Bertie County*

## **The impacts of learning differences for youth**

*“I think we need to recognize that not everybody’s on the same wavelength. Different learning strategies for different kids, more one-on-one and less large classrooms where people can’t learn a lot. And sometimes it’s not even school, but people take their problems to school. So, we also need people to help kids if they’re going through stuff in school because it will help them be better academically if their altogether life is better.” — Young Adult*



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