

## YOUNG ADULTS

In his 2023 State of the Commonwealth address Gov. Beshear specifically called out the need for “educational opportunities, mental health counseling, addiction treatment, and wrap-around services” in response to recent issues within the Department for Juvenile Justice facilities. An opportunity exists to provide those services to young adults to help avoid justice involvement in the first place. Even for the population that will be incarcerated, additional support is needed post-release to interrupt the cycle of homelessness and justice-involvement.

Studies show that justice-involved youth see a short-term increase in employment, likely tied to probation and parole requirements, but a long-term decrease in employment prospects tied to a substantial reduction in formal schooling. Incarcerated individuals are 26% less likely to graduate high school than non-arrested individuals (Hjalmarsson, 2008). Incarcerated young adults are also more likely to drop out of the labor force entirely (Apel & Sweeten, 2009). This combined with a precipitous

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drop in the labor force participation rate for 16-19 and 20-24 year-old age groups of -20.0 and -8.8 percentage points respectively over 2000-2020, as reported by KY Stats, further compounds Kentucky’s existing workforce participation woes (Cunningham, 2022). In fact, Kentucky’s age-adjusted labor force participation rate of 61.6 trails 6 out of 7 surrounding states, with only West Virginia trailing at 59.3 percent (Ibid). While the COVID-19 pandemic saw

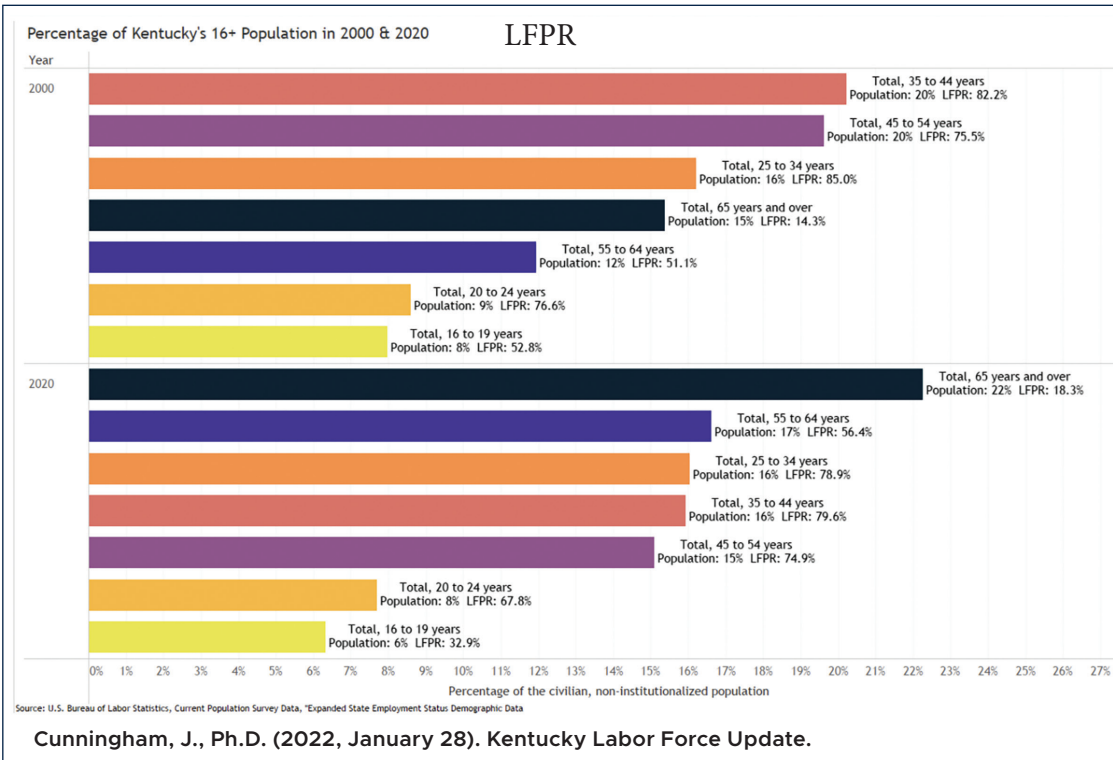
more older adults exiting the workforce the young adult labor force is not replacing them at a rate to keep up. Along with the benefits to society from greater workforce participation, robust young adult programming has impacts on recidivism while being a net positive in state and local budgets. “In 2020, despite more than a half-decade of falling youth arrests and declining rates of youth incarceration since 2014, 40 states and Washington, D.C. report spending at least \$100,000 annually per confined child, with some states spending more than \$500,000 per youth per year.” (Justice Policy Institute, 2020.). For the time period that data was available, Kentucky reported spending \$100,740 a year on juvenile incarceration. Legislative leaders are on record in support of reforms

to the juvenile justice system that addresses violent crime, while promoting expanded use of diversion programs for non-violent offenses. “Detention is ineffective. It is expensive. And it produces even worse conduct.” Said Sen. Whitney Westerfield (R-Fruithill) in response to the current model of youth detention. Furthermore, current research points to an increase in risk-taking and reduced attentional performance after only 3 months of confinement. (Meijer et al., 2018)

Another avenue to explore for reducing juvenile detention

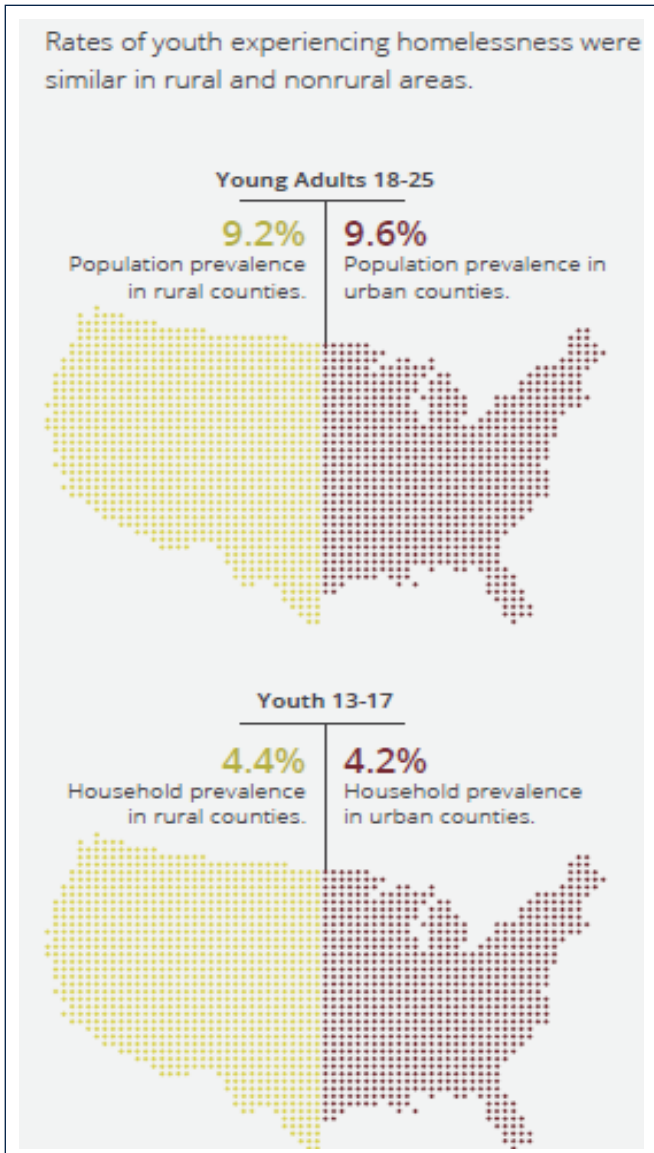
is to improve access to housing for youth. According to a study of runaway and homeless youth nearly 44% have been jailed or imprisoned, and 62% reported they have been arrested at some point (Coalition for Juvenile Justice). Researchers cite evidence that shows offenses committed by young adult homeless are crimes of survival, and when offenders are released without proper arrangements for their housing, they return to a cycle of re-offending to meet their basic needs (Self, 2021). Creating stable housing programs for young adults is one way to interrupt the cycle of justice-involvement and homelessness and reduce criminal activity.

There are leading indicators of young adult



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homelessness that need to be addressed along with housing interventions. According to Voices of Youth Count, amongst young adults that have reported “explicit homelessness” in the 12-month study period, those without a high school diploma or GED were 346% higher risk of housing instability. For those with an annual household income of less than \$24,000 a year, the rate is 162% (Morton et al., (2017).

The problem of young adult homelessness is not an exclusively urban problem, with a Voices of Youth Count Report that 9.2% of young adults in rural communities, unaccompanied by a parent or guardian, experience

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some form of homelessness (couch surfing, shelters, running away from home, or being kicked out of their home) compared with 9.6% in urban areas (Morton et al., (2017). However the challenges facing young adults in rural communities are unique in that they report higher incidences of “couch-surfing” as opposed to staying in shelters, by a factor of two to one. (Ibid) The problem is especially pronounced amongst young adults who have foster care experience with a report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation showing that 1 in 3 will be homeless or face housing instability at some point (AECF, 2023).

**Policymakers should work to expand access to workforce readiness programming targeted at Young Adults**

To address the factors that lead to justice-involvement amongst young adults, and improve Kentucky’s workforce participation rate, policymakers should work to expand access to workforce readiness programming targeted at young adults. Goodwill offers a program in partnership with KentuckianaWorks called “The Spot” a young adult campus in the Louisville area. This is a model that can be scaled as needed to serve other communities across the commonwealth by partnering with local workforce boards and community colleges. Additional funding will be needed to support these programs and industry-recognized credentialing for participants. Where available, funding will also be needed to provide transitional supportive housing for young adults experiencing homelessness. This model is consistent with other Goodwill programming that emphasizes the need for wraparound services for the populations we serve. The need is even greater in rural communities, where programs that previously relied on Medicaid funding closed due to inconsistent enrollment and funding streams. (Fletcher, 2019)

For individuals who have not been able to access these services, and have found themselves involved with the justice system, policymakers should implement consistent guidelines for young adult diversion programs statewide to address sentencing disparities. In 2020 the Urban Institute studied reforms to KY’s juvenile justice system that directed more youth into diversion programs showing the program offered high success rates, with 9 out of 10 successfully completing the program, and no statistically significant change in recidivism (Harvell et al., 2020). Given the success of these programs in reintegrating young adults back into society, the model should be applied consistently statewide, and data should be collected so policymakers can make informed decisions on their effectiveness in reducing recidivism.

## YOUNG ADULTS PARTICIPANT STORY

Originally from Louisiana, **Akeim** and his family were forced to move to Texas after Hurricane Katrina ripped through their community in 2005.

Not long after, Akeim fell for a girl who lived in Kentucky. After experiencing multiple family issues, he wanted to find a way to be with her – and that turned out to be a bicycle. He rode from Texas all the way to Kentucky. All total, it was a five-day trip that turned his hobby of cycling into a passion.

Although he was finally with his girlfriend, he knew he had to begin providing for himself. After his apartment complex raised his rent, he became homeless at 19 years old. That led him to Louisville, where he was connected with resources for homeless individuals.

“I had nowhere else to go,” he said.

He was set up at a safe space and later a single room occupancy (SRO) facility, where he has stayed for more than a year. He said, “Most of the people in there keep asking me, ‘Why are you in here?’” To which he responds, “‘Because of other people.’”

After finding a place to stay, neighbors at the SRO told Akeim about The Spot: Young Adult Opportunity Campus, a free career resource hub for Louisville youths ages 16-24. It was there Akeim learned about turning his passion for cycling into a career.

“I started having more fun with it, more than it just being a form of transportation,” he said. “When I got here to the Spot, they asked me, ‘Would you like to focus on that as a career?’ I said, ‘It can be a career!’”

Akeim was connected with Kathryn, a career coach at the Spot – a partnership of Goodwill Industries of Kentucky and KentuckianaWorks – who guided him through the many job-readiness trainings available there, such as soft skills training, career pathway exploration, digital and financial literacy, resume writing, mock interviewing, personal branding and more. She also connected him with Goodwill’s Last Mile to Work program, which supplies used bikes to employees or clients who may need them. The program helped Akeim land an internship at Middle of Town Cycling.

After researching what cyclists do to be successful, Kathryn even helped Akeim set up a fundraising account to help fund his cycling career. Akeim is currently saving up to compete in the Indy Cycloplex this April.

“I did all the classes I could without losing time on the bike,” he said. “Those classes helped me continue to have



Akeim

food, a source of income. ... (Kathryn) has been one of my biggest supporters. It’s like having my very first fan. It was enlightening to know that there are people out there that will support me, so long as I support myself.”

Akeim said he found a family he’d never had in the Spot, and also Ridenfaden, a group of Germantown-based cyclists that get together to ride on a weekly basis. John, the first person Akeim met in the group, said he’s been a welcome part of their family.

“There’s been times where Akeim has needed a lot of help,” John said. “A number of our members have stepped in to help him out in situations where, either there’s a lack of nutrition, or having a place to get cleaned up or help find things that were stolen. It takes a village – we take care of our own people.”

Akeim has completed all his courses at the Spot and now, with his support system behind him, is following his dream of becoming a professional cyclist. And he has a message for individuals who have experienced similar challenges.

“For people who are struggling to keep doing what they want to do,” he said, “don’t hesitate. ... Hesitation leaves you with the thought you can’t do it at all.”

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