

Young Adults Take Longer to Get Good Jobs

Two new reports from Georgetown University find that more young adults with college degrees end up with “good jobs,” but it takes them longer to get there than previous generations.

By Maria Carrasco // May 19, 2022

Young adults today need more time, education and work experience to secure what’s considered a “good job” than previous generations did, according to a pair of [new reports](#) from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW). Today it takes most young adults until their 30th birthday to get a good job, while 40 years ago most had a good job by their late 20s.

CEW defines a “good job” as one that allows young adults to be economically self-sufficient. For workers 45 and younger, that means earning at least \$35,000 annually, and for those over 45 it’s at least \$45,000 a year, a figure that varies somewhat according to the local standard of living. Nationwide, the median annual salary for a good job for workers between 25 and 35 is \$57,000.

The surest path to financial self-sufficiency is a college degree, according to the reports, published under the rubric “The Uncertain Pathway from Youth to a Good Job.” Today 80 percent of workers with a bachelor’s degree or higher have a good job by age 35, compared to 56 percent of those with some college or an associate degree, 42 percent of those with only a high school diploma and 26 percent of workers with less than a high school diploma.

“Clearly, getting a bachelor’s degree or higher is increasingly the best bet when it comes to boosting one’s chances of having a good job,” the research states.

The two reports, titled “How Limits to Educational Affordability, Work-Based Learning, and Career Counseling Impede Progress Toward Good Jobs” and “How Racial and Gender Bias Impede Progress Toward Good Jobs,” use survey data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Kathryn Campbell, co-author of the reports and associate director of editorial policy at CEW, said the reports address the common narrative that young people today don’t have as much opportunity as young people in the past.

“I think our report gives a little bit of nuance to the narrative, in the sense that what we found is that when adults are younger than 30, that is the case—they have less opportunity to have a good job than, say, comparable numbers of the baby boomer generation,” Campbell said. “But older than that, young people today are actually more likely to have a good job than the previous generation.”

That's true only of workers with a bachelor's degree or higher, however. Just over 70 percent of college graduates born between 1946 and 1950 had a good job by the time they were 35, compared to 80 percent of the cohort born between 1981 and 1985.

And though more of today's young adults may be doing well by 35 than the previous generation, Campbell said the fact that it takes them until age 30 to get a good job has consequences for the way they live their lives, perhaps compelling them to delay marriage or childbirth or buying a home. And according to the research, households led by 35-year-olds today have less than two-thirds the net worth that similar households held 20 years earlier.

Artem Gulish, senior policy strategist and research faculty at CEW and co-author of the reports, said between the baby boomer generation and millennials, there's been a shift in the types of skills required to obtain a good job.

"Previously, many young people, in particular young men, could finish high school and get a job in a factory relatively easily, or another blue-collar job," Gulish said. "Whereas today, many jobs require at least some quality work experience, which takes time to attain. And jobs require people to gain more skills, especially cognitive and interpersonal skills. Previously, many blue-collar jobs, in particular, were more about physical skill, which didn't take as long to acquire."

Matthew Hora, co-director of the Center for College-Workforce Transitions (CCWT) and associate professor of adult and higher education at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, said he wasn't surprised by CEW's findings; bachelor's degrees have long signaled to employers that a worker has certain skills, he noted.

"For a long time, one of the key gatekeeping mechanisms to well-paying jobs was having a bachelor's degree," Hora said. "I think in some disciplines—take engineering, for example—it's fairly safe to say that a good three- to five-year education and training in some of those disciplines is essential to get some of those well-paying jobs. I think it's more debatable with other occupations."

Hora said the research his team does at CCWT shows that some human resource directors and hiring supervisors equate a bachelor's degree with a sense of work ethic and persistence, but not as an evaluation of skills or knowledge for a job.

"I think it's really complicated why a bachelor's degree has led to these discrepancies in wages and financial security," Hora said. "But one of the reasons is the people doing the hiring look at a bachelor's degree as a signal of a host of attributes of the job applicant, some of which, in our view as researchers, are highly questionable."

The CEW reports note that as postsecondary education has become key to finding a good job, the cost of attending a four-year institution has roughly tripled, reaching an average of

nearly \$30,000 a year for tuition, fees and room and board. To help more young adults reap the benefits of a college degree, educators need to invest in making degrees more accessible to any young person who wants to earn one, Campbell said.

“We do want there to be good jobs available to people who don’t pursue a postsecondary education, but we know postsecondary education is a really strong pathway to a good job,” Campbell said. “So making that pathway easier to travel is really an imperative for educators in order to ensure that young people get the optimal outcome from their college experience. People go to college for a wide variety of reasons, and getting a good job is one of them.”

Work-based learning programs, including internships and apprenticeships, can also expand access for young adults to get good jobs. But the CEW research found that those opportunities are more common among those who attend college; 54 percent of young adults with a bachelor’s degree or higher completed work-based learning programs, compared to just 7 percent of those with a high school diploma or less.

The reports recommend that high schools and colleges employ more career counselors to help teenagers and young adults make fully informed decisions about their educational and career pathways. Currently each counselor is responsible for almost 70 percent more students than CEW’s recommended student-to-counselor ratio of 250 to one, according to the reports.

“Essentially, young people need guidance,” Gulish said. “We have more details which are becoming available about which pathways are more promising, but young people don’t have much experience—they may not necessarily understand what would work for them and what wouldn’t.”