

Federal 2021 Policy Priorities

With the backdrop of a global pandemic, national social justice movements that force reckoning with longstanding systemic inequities, and a new presidential administration, Young Invincibles (YI) will continue to advocate for young people without sacrificing our values, morals, and mission as an organization. We welcome new leadership to Washington and around the country, but remain steadfast in our goal to continue fighting for expanded economic opportunities for 18-34 year olds, both nationally and regionally. Our work will reflect our values of community, collaboration, equity, bold ideas, and young adult power. As an organization that understands the complexity of young adults' lives today, YI focuses on the intersection of a range of issue areas that affect a young adult's ability to achieve economic stability: health care, higher education, the workforce, and voting.

Each year, YI develops our policy priorities based on a combination of research and statistics, what we hear directly from young adults (including our national and regional Youth Advisory Boards), and our knowledge of policy and politics in California, Colorado, Illinois, New York, Texas, and Washington, DC.

In the sections below, we present our 2021 policy priorities for each of our issue areas.

- In **higher education**, YI will focus on (1) tackling the student debt crisis and increasing college affordability; (2) strengthening academic success, program structures, and support systems; and (3) confronting on-campus racial and economic inequities.
- In **health care**, YI will focus on (1) securing universal coverage by increased access and affordability; and (2) prioritizing health equity, and (3) improving mental health parity.
- In the area of **workforce development**, YI will focus on (1) expanding career pathways and workforce equity; and (2) strengthening social programs to address basic human needs.
- Finally, YI will work to increase **civic engagement** among young adults by supporting policies to strengthen and expand voter education and engagement among the next generation of voters.

We view our research, policy, and communications strategies through the lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion. In 2021, our policy and messaging will more explicitly reflect this commitment to our staff, partners, allies, funders, and congressional champions.

YI is dedicated to continuous learning when it comes to building our racial literacy and cultural competency. As an organization that has dedicated itself towards developing a culture and practices of anti-racism, we will continue showing up for other organizations focused on young people of color as effectively as possible. The policies we advocate and partners we support will reflect a stronger awareness of how we tackle the root causes of systemic inequities.

Our federal strategy will provide a broad platform for our regional offices ([California](#), [Colorado](#), [Illinois](#), [New York](#), and [Texas](#)) to tailor their respective agendas in a way that reflects their policy and political landscapes. **As much as possible, where regions believe they can support the federal agenda, they will do so.**

Higher Education

For much of the last year, upheaval caused by the pandemic and the persistence of racial injustice has challenged higher education in the United States. Together, Covid-19 and social activism have put the inequities students have endured through separate and unequal experiences in higher education on stark display, even as the pandemic disproportionately affects communities of color.¹ For our economy to fully recover, young adults will increasingly need a postsecondary education to qualify for even entry-level positions with a living wage.

Some form of education beyond a high school diploma is increasingly linked to social mobility and economic opportunity for young people. Nearly all the jobs (95%) created in the recovery from the Great Recession went to people who had at least some college education, leaving behind job-seekers with a high school diploma or less.² Despite decades of efforts to narrow economic and educational achievement gaps across income levels and racial and ethnic identities, however, higher education remains largely separate and unequal.³

Inequitable educational opportunities and outcomes remain alarming, especially as education should be a pathway toward financial security. In a recent national survey commissioned by YI of 18-34 year-olds, across political ideology:

- Roughly two-thirds of the sample took out student loans at some point;
- Roughly half of the sample had less than \$50,000 in student debt;
- 60% of young people support full student loan forgiveness for all borrowers;
- 70% of young people agree that the government should help cover living expenses at public two-and four-year colleges; and
- 69% of young people agree that all colleges should be free to attend.

The new majority demographics of American college students makes plain the urgent need for a comprehensive reorientation of federal higher education policy. The Covid-19 pandemic makes this need all the more urgent. Lawmakers must recognize that young people will now demand new programs, ways to learn, and ways to meet the needs of their increasingly complicated lives. If federal and state governments want to set the country on the path of economic recovery, they must invest in their citizens. Part of that investment will be through increased funding for post-high school educational opportunities to ensure that there are viable, quality pathways for young people. Even beyond the pandemic, the economic effects of Covid-19 will remain for a long time.

In 2021, YI will continue to advocate for student-centered higher education policy changes that advance racial and economic equity to empower this generation of young adults to participate fully in our democracy and workforce of the future. Covid-19 has

created significant and widely documented problems for higher education: enrollment has dropped—especially at community colleges and among students identified as male—institutions have struggled to move classes online, and significant inequities in access to broadband and hardware have hampered students.⁴ Although federal action under the CARES Act provided some financial support, it has neither been sufficient nor effectively distributed. Nationally, we are not doing nearly enough to ensure students—especially students of color and students from low-income backgrounds—have access to quality higher education that sets them up for success.

YI believes to move beyond the damage brought by Covid-19, policies and practices must bring necessary change to our systems of higher education. We must remove regulatory, statutory, and practice barriers that keep students from accessing aid; ensure colleges apply admissions and enrollment standards equitably; provide open education resources, robust broadband and holistic basic needs; and support the academic success and mental well-being of students by recruiting Black, Latinx and Indigenous practitioners.

To advocate effectively, we must demand schools and programs demonstrate quality assurance before receiving federal funding; the government protects borrowers' rights and pushes for data transparency; and states reverse the trend of reducing funding to public colleges and universities.

TACKLE THE STUDENT DEBT CRISIS AND INCREASE COLLEGE AFFORDABILITY

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the unstable economy, and the great uncertainty facing higher education, college affordability and accessibility have never been more critical. Young adults who lose jobs historically pursue further education to update their skills or change careers. However, the loss of income now makes higher education more out of reach than ever before.

Rising tuition has threatened affordability and access, leaving many students and their families either saddled with onerous debt or unable to afford college altogether. Cost barriers are especially high for many Black, Latinx, and other students of color, as well as for low-income students, and students from diverse but marginalized backgrounds. Covid-19 has made the weight of student loan debt even heavier on both the health and economic security of people of color and women. By pursuing policies that help more students pursue affordable higher education, lawmakers can help build a stronger middle class and develop the entrepreneurs and skilled workers a strong economy needs.

Federally, YI will:

- **Advocate for broad-based student debt relief.** This priority includes cancelling debt for the majority of the 44 million student borrowers via administrative action by the Secretary of Education or legislative action by Congress. Relief should include, at minimum, borrowers currently unemployed due to Covid-19 pandemic, economically distressed borrowers, and low-income borrowers. Cancellation should include debt

from both federally-held and private student loans.

- **Advocate for a new federal-state partnership** to expand debt-free college for in-state students at public two- and four-year colleges. Such a partnership would include a historic investment in public education and minority-serving institutions, directing the greatest investments toward institutions with low overall resources and low per-student funding.
- **Advocate for a modernized student financial aid model** that is accessible and adjusted to meet the needs of today's students. Such a model must include greater flexibility and extend eligibility to undocumented students, as well as other historically disenfranchised populations.
- **Support reinstating and strengthening student protections**, promoting greater accountability for higher education institutions. Protection measures should include restoration of the gainful employment rule, closure of the 90/10 loophole, and replacing the DeVos-era borrower defense repayment rule.

Regionally, YI will:

- In **California**, YI will advocate for a strengthened and expanded Cal Grant program to make college more affordable, more inclusive of non-tuition expenses, and to reduce low and middle-income Californians' reliance on student debt. YI California will also advocate for stronger consumer protections for student borrowers impacted by Covid-19.
- In **Colorado**, YI will advocate for a base funding adjustment that shifts funds to the schools serving students with the highest need. YI Colorado will also support stronger student borrower protections that also include borrowers with private student loans.
- In **Illinois**, YI will advocate for a funding formula that adequately, equitably, and transparently allocates state appropriations to higher education institutions.
- In **New York**, YI will focus on reversing state divestment from public institutions, funding New York's Opportunity Programs that provide low-income students with financial aid and support with non-tuition costs, and pushing the City University of New York (CUNY) to become tuition free, again. YI will also advocate for extending the number of semesters that apply to the Tuition Assistance Program and requiring FAFSA completion as a graduation requirement to further support college access and success.
- In **Texas**, YI will advocate for boosting degree completion by making college affordable, including expansion of state-based financial aid and open educational resources. YI Texas will advocate for stronger consumer protections for student loan borrowers, including appointment of a student loan debt ombudsman, pausing student loan debt collections until the end of the pandemic, and creating servicer guidelines.

STRENGTHEN ACADEMIC SUCCESS AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Although the federal government has created financial relief funds in response to Covid-19 for many Americans, college students are often left out of programs like stimulus checks and unemployment insurance, leaving them on their own to support themselves.

Two-thirds hold a job while pursuing a degree. Thirty-seven percent are 25 or older. And, one-in-four college students also manage the responsibilities of being a parent or guardian. Still, more than a third report not knowing where their next meal will come from, and ten percent experience housing insecurity. Moreover, while Pell eligibility to incarcerated students was restored under recent Covid relief measures this should be used as a model for institutions to act more aggressively to remove the application box for prior convictions. Taken together, these efforts can drastically improve the opportunities for access and success for many young adults.

A growing number of states and even some cities are adopting models to cover tuition costs for students while encouraging more low-income and first-generation students to pursue postsecondary education.⁵ Although these programs may increase initial enrollment, students need support beyond tuition payments to ultimately complete their programs.

Federally, YI will:

- **Advocate for a stronger federal agenda that addresses students' basic needs, including mental and emotional well-being.** This agenda must include addressing food, housing, and transportation support, as well as reforming campus-based student health services.
- **Advocate for more robust investments in child care for students,** including Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) and Child Tax Credits.
- **Support expanded investments in broadband access and technology** that strengthen online course delivery.

Regionally, YI will:

- In **California**, YI will advocate for expanded CalFRESH eligibility to more college students, P-EBT expansion, and strengthened basic needs resources for food insecure student populations. YI California will also seek rental assistance and relief for Covid-19 impacted students, while demanding equitable broadband access.
- In **Colorado**, YI will advocate for expanded student emergency grants and support the continued funding and expansion of free online textbooks for students.
- In **Illinois**, YI will advocate for robust student basic needs. This work includes child care for student parents, housing, food, tutoring, mental health access, and broadband access.
- In **New York**, YI will advocate for ending student homelessness and hunger, while pushing for better data systems to track outcomes by students and highlight equity gaps.
- In **Texas**, YI will advocate for postsecondary liaisons for student parents to direct critical resources to those students. Student parent support must include ensuring on-campus food pantries remain open and are frequently advertised to students.

CONFRONT THE RACIAL AND ECONOMIC INEQUITIES ON UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES

Increasing postsecondary attainment rates requires institutions to better reflect society and better support students from the most marginalized racial, ethnic, and income backgrounds. Federal loans and grants have allowed millions of students to enroll in college, but the futures of too many young people have been hampered, rather than helped, by student debt. Black, Latinx, and other students and parents of color, along with people from low-income communities, face greater obstacles in affording college and paying down their student debt. These challenges result from a long history of segregation, redlining, and ongoing discrimination that has led to structural inequities in college access and the labor market.

Moreover, borrowing rates and loan amounts are very high among Black students,⁶ whose college enrollment has grown steadily even as state funding for colleges has declined and tuition increased. Some low-income students see debt as too risky. When they choose not to borrow, those students can face difficult tradeoffs that hurt their chances of going to college, getting a degree, and ultimately achieving financial security.

In a time of severe financial constraint, higher education and policy leaders must resist temptations to disinvest from equity initiatives and instead place this work as the lens through which they see the way forward. Colleges and universities can only meet their full potential by serving as examples to society at-large of places that act on public commitments to advancing racial, economic, and social equity. Decades of research and experience are available to draw from as institutions enact equity-based commitments.

Federally, YI will:

- **Advocate for redirecting merit aid dollars to need-based assistance.** This priority includes increasing the value of Pell Grants, Federal Work-Study, Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants, and Title III aid for minority-serving institutions. Colleges and universities should allocate any remaining federal work-study wages or Federal Supplementary Educational Opportunity Grant money directly to students as emergency aid. They should also quickly and equitably disburse emergency aid funds made available by federal legislation in 2020.
- **Advocate for increased funding for colleges and universities to promote, study and implement student equity resources.** This includes offering incentives for states to conduct racial equity audits, address racial disparities resulting from gaps in educational opportunity, and develop a framework for applying a racial equity lens to all education policies and programs.
- **Support strengthened preparation, recruitment, professional development, and retention for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous faculty.** This includes covering teachers' preparation, expanding high-quality pathways to teaching and school leadership for all candidates, increasing investments in teacher and leader preparation programs at minority-serving institutions, and raising teacher compensation.

Regionally, YI will:

- In **California**, YI will advocate for prior learning or work experience for college credits.
- In **Colorado**, YI will advocate for putting test-optional admissions into code, amend regulatory language that would allow DACA recipients to receive licenses through the Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies, and support the removal of legacy admissions at CO public universities.
- In **Illinois**, YI will advocate for expansion of the need-based Monetary Award Program (MAP) Grant and student emergency grants. YI Illinois will also examine the low enrollment of Black students at the University of Illinois as a case study for how similarly underrepresented communities may fare.
- In **New York**, YI will advocate for having New York adopt an equity-driven postsecondary attainment goal that creates clear and explicit outcome targets, ending transcript withholding, and supporting programs and policies that allow for a seamless transfer process.

Health Care

The public health crisis created by the Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare the critical importance of having accessible, affordable health coverage. While young adults have experienced major gains in health coverage over the last decade, cutting the uninsured rate in half for 18-34 year olds, those gains have been steadily eroding over the last four years thanks to the policies of the Trump administration. The previous administration systematically chipped away at the Affordable Care Act and Medicaid, making it harder for young people to enroll in coverage. By cutting the ACA open enrollment period in half, drastically reducing funding for outreach and enrollment support, expanding “skimpy” non-ACA compliant plans, and actively supporting a lawsuit that would strike down the ACA in its entirety, the Trump administration’s policies have led to an increase the number of uninsured and underinsured young adults.

These policies have also disproportionately impacted young people of color. Policies such as the public charge rule which greatly expanded how the use of public benefit programs impacted certain immigration statuses has caused a “chilling effect” among certain communities such as Latinx families that in response disenrolled from Medicaid, even though they remained rightfully eligible for coverage. The administration also controversially approved waivers to allow states to implement work reporting requirements to their Medicaid programs, creating unnecessary administrative burdens and confusion, which then led to eligible enrollees losing their Medicaid coverage, before the policy was halted by the courts.

In a recent national survey commissioned by YI of young adults 18-34 year olds, across political ideology:

- Roughly 17% of young people reported being not currently covered by health insurance;
- 64% of young adults agree that the provision of health care is the responsibility of the federal government.
- 74% of young adults strongly or somewhat favor Medicare-for-All
- 78% of young adults strongly or somewhat favor the expansion of the ACA with a public option.

The economic fallout and public health crisis created by the Covid-19 pandemic are the most glaring examples of a broken system that must be fundamentally changed. Moreover, it shined a spotlight on existing deep-seated inequities in health care for communities of color and amplifies social and economic factors that contribute to poor health outcomes. YI believes that health care access should be universally accessible, comprehensive, and affordable by all.

SECURE UNIVERSAL COVERAGE BY INCREASED ACCESS AND AFFORDABILITY

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted one of the longest standing and pressing issues for many people across the United States – the inequitable availability and lack of affordability of health coverage and care. Our current system, under which young people often don't have access or can't afford the health coverage and care they need is unacceptable. Unaffordable coverage and care remain a widespread problem, continuing to disproportionately affect low-income people, especially people of color. Our country's reliance on tax-subsidized employer- sponsored insurance and our history of race-based employment discrimination, mean these groups are particularly likely to lack affordable coverage or be exposed to crippling medical debt.

Federally, YI will:

- **Advocate for restoring, strengthening, and expanding the Affordable Care Act and Medicaid, undoing the harm of the Trump Administration** with the goal of moving towards universal coverage.
- **Advocate for expanding Medicaid and ACA coverage to all young people, regardless of immigration status.** This includes rescinding the harmful public charge rule, extending ACA and Medicaid eligibility to DACA recipients and those with Special Immigrant Juvenile Status, and increasing existing outreach and public education efforts to encourage and educate immigrant communities about health care and public insurance programs.
- **Advocate for improving affordability by lowering premiums and out of pocket costs and addressing medical debt** for young people. This includes increasing ACA subsidies, improving the value of coverage, and strengthening consumer protections.
- **Combat Covid by massively scaling up consumer education and support enrollment efforts in key states** so that young adults and young families know about their options to enroll in coverage for themselves and their children. This includes re-opening HealthCare.Gov, expanded funding to Navigator groups and other community-based organizations and advertising to ensure that everyone who needs coverage knows how and where to enroll.

Regionally, YI will:

- In **California**, YI will advocate for Medi-Cal covering all income-eligible adults and increasing universality and affordability regardless of immigration status. YI California will also support efforts to lower prescription drug costs for young adults and young families.
- In **Colorado**, YI will support efforts to create a public healthcare option for consumers to use rather than private insurance.
- In **New York**, YI will advocate for expanding healthcare access to all New Yorkers while eliminating coverage gaps, affordability burdens and ending unfair medical billing practices.
- In **Texas**, YI will advocate for expanding Medicaid and supporting a Special Enrollment Period with broad eligibility criteria.

PRIORITIZE HEALTH EQUITY

While young people have made tremendous gains in health coverage over the last ten years, severe disparities among the remaining uninsured population remain. Young black and Latinx adults are more likely to be uninsured compared to young white adults. Black children are more than twice as likely as white children to suffer from asthma.⁷ Latinos, Native Americans, Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders, and Black Americans are diagnosed with diabetes at higher rates than whites.⁸ And average life expectancy is almost three years lower for rural Americans compared to those who live in metropolitan areas. We can and must fix these inequities by expanding coverage, making health care more affordable, and tackling implicit bias in our health care system.

The legacy of exploitation and discrimination continue to shape the way our systems are built today. Too often, implicit and explicit stereotypes, bias, racism, sexism, ableism, and other forms of discrimination impact the quality of care that patients receive and the ability of health care workers of color to do their jobs. This is particularly true for people of color who are women, who have a disability, who are LGBTQ+, and others who may experience multiple forms of discrimination. Long-term efforts to address health disparities will ultimately be unsuccessful if they do not also address underlying structures that prolong and entrench racist systems and discriminatory behaviors.

Federally, YI will:

- **Fund research to combat systemic racism in public health and create anti-racist health policies.** This will include ensuring federal data collection and analysis is adequately funded and designed to allow for disaggregation by race, gender, geography, disability status, and other important variables.
- **Advocate for strong nondiscrimination protections for LGBTQ+ people in health insurance and health care.** This includes reversing the Trump administration's guidance on Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act, restoring all HHS regulations that specifically protect trans individuals from discrimination in health care settings, and ensuring all LGBTQ+ people have full access to basic health care.
- **Support sexual and reproductive health justice.** This includes addressing disparities in maternal mortality rates, ending the Hyde amendment, and reversing policies that place undue burdens on consumers and marketplace plans that include abortion coverage.

Regionally YI will:

- In **Colorado**, YI will support efforts to require insurance companies to cover prevention measures for substance use disorders.
- In **New York**, YI will advocate for a temporary state-funded Covid-19 Essential Plan for Immigrant New Yorkers that would reach those up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level who have had Covid-19, and are currently excluded from coverage because of their immigration status.
- In **Texas**, YI will advocate for expanded maternal and women's health care coverage and access.

IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH ACCESS AND CARE

Young people have been characterized as the most depressed and anxious generation in history. The generational trauma brought by the Covid-19 pandemic will echo through years ahead for today's young people, especially those who have lost family members or whose family finances have been upended by the economic downturn. Moreover, the anxiety of the pandemic coupled with the social unrest and resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement have had a particular impact on Black young adults. As much as young adults struggled to access mental health and counseling services before Covid-19, the gap between need and availability has only expanded. Young Americans have suffered without the mental health support that they need, leading to despair, self-medication, and a deepening opioid crisis that has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. As a result, average U.S. life expectancy has declined for the first time in generations.

These are avoidable, and we must eliminate barriers to mental health treatment and must work to destigmatize those who seek help. Every American who needs it should be able to access mental health care or substance use treatment, no matter where they live. In order to meet the needs of young people today, we must invest in culturally competent mental health care, improve mental health parity and ensure mental health care services are covered by health insurance. That includes diversifying counselors and ensuring that healthcare professionals understand cultural differences in how patients interact with providers and the healthcare system.

Federally, YI will:

- **Improve mental health parity and enforcement.** Despite mental health parity laws that require mental health services to be covered just as physical health services are, in practice, parity has been difficult to achieve, and young people often lack access to mental health services. Stronger enforcement and resources are required to truly achieve parity.
- **Advocate for resources to support campus-based mental health services and treatment to all students who need it,** including the removal of barriers to obtaining such treatment. This will include ensuring health insurers adequately cover mental health and substance use treatment and invest in training and hiring more mental health providers, substance use counselors, and peer support counselors, including by expanding funding for health clinics, especially in rural areas, and increasing access to these services through Medicaid.
- **Invest in the mental health workforce.** This includes dedicated funding for culturally competent mental health providers and diversifying the mental health workforce to better reflect the young adult population seeking care.
- **Sustain expanded telehealth services.** Telehealth services ballooned nearly overnight once the Covid pandemic hit, and has been a vitally important tool to expand mental health services through teletherapy. These services should be studied and expanded to ensure effective mental and behavioral health services can be maximized thanks to technology.

Regionally YI will:

- In **California**, YI will advocate for expanded mental health counseling and support at the institutional level for all young Californians.
- In **Colorado**, YI will advocate for passage of the Healthy Minds Resolution and for insurance companies to cover an annual mental health visit.
- In **Illinois**, YI will advocate for fully funding the Mental Health on Campus Act to provide adequate mental health support to students statewide, while also creating a statewide network of post-secondary institutions on student mental health needs.
- In **New York**, YI will advocate for increased state investment in mental health counseling on public college campuses with a priority for hiring more Black and brown counselors.
- In **Texas**, YI will advocate for creating a postsecondary mental health task force while advocating for increased funding for postsecondary mental health providers and enhanced mental health services for all college students.

Workforce

Young adults are now the most educated, most diverse, and most indebted generation in America's history. The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the cracks in the surface of America's already frail social safety net. The consequences have been stark and disproportionately felt by people who are poor and working-class. Many factors have contributed to the historically high unemployment rate: lack of worker power, widespread job cuts hitting the labor market, short-term business decisions, and a lack of demand in certain sectors.

Recovery to date has been anemic. Despite the largest spending package in American history, young people were largely an afterthought in the distribution of funds. Statistics by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services tracking youth unemployment (16-24 years old) during Covid-19 registered an unemployment rate of 11% in November 2020.⁹ According to the December 2020 Bureau of Labor Statistics employment report, without a high school diploma are more than twice as likely (9.9%) to be unemployed than young people with a Bachelor's degree (4.4%).¹⁰

In a recent national survey commissioned by YI of young adults 18-34 year olds, across political ideology:

- More than 40% of the sample earned less than \$40,000 per year;
- Nearly half of the sample were employed full-time;
- 49% of young people say that federal funding for apprenticeship programs should be increased;
- 60% of young people stated that the minimum wage should be raised to at least \$10 per hour; and
- 54% of conservatives, 77% of liberals, and 68% of moderates support expanding Earned Income Tax Credit benefits to adults without children

Black and brown communities are most at risk during the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing economic crisis that has resulted from deliberate policy choices including redlining, housing segregation, historical disinvestment, less access to high-quality health care, and less access to crucial benefits such as paid leave. Though Covid-19 does not discriminate, our country's policies do. To reorient our workforce systems, we must ensure equitable employment outcomes, redesign training programs, gather better data, and center marginalized communities.

YI believes young people need high-quality and well-paying early work experience—whether in the form of summer jobs, college work-study, paid internships, entry-level jobs out of high school, working at family-owned businesses, or volunteering—to gain readiness for future jobs and explore careers. With access to high-quality training linked

directly to employment, credentials, and work experiences, young people who are neither in school nor working can achieve economic independence and thrive. These young people can be the employees, entrepreneurs, and leaders who propel our economy and tackle society's most pressing challenges in the years and decades to come.

EXPAND CAREER PATHWAYS AND WORKFORCE EQUITY

Covid-19 has shown that we need a different approach to support workers displaced by structural changes to the labor market. The national economy has shed jobs at an unprecedented rate during the Covid-19 pandemic. At the height of stay-at-home restrictions, the youth unemployment rate peaked at 26.9%,¹¹ which is the highest recorded rate since the government started collecting data in 1948. Recognizing some signs of recovery, the federal government must still embrace interventions that prevent short-term employment disruptions from becoming protracted economic hardship. For the millions of workers who have lost their jobs because of the pandemic, job creation proposals must focus on both education and training services to help improve the labor market prospects of young adults.

Research evidence of quality in skills training programs remains mixed, suggesting that not all upskilling or reskilling anticipates future labor market demands. Unfortunately, workers are left to determine whether taking time away from working--still paying for training and contending with the costs of child care, housing, and transportation, among all other demands of adult life--will result in getting a better job. To make the next economic recovery equitable, we as a nation must address the long-standing barriers that impede entry into quality employment and job training programs for millions of young people--particularly those of color, immigrants, and low-income youth.

Federally, YI will:

- **Advocate for reauthorization and strengthening of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) to ensure states and communities have necessary resources to develop and implement partnerships.** This advocacy includes modernizing and expanding federal apprenticeships through industry partnerships that develop career pathways into critical industries.
- **Advocate for increased wages and strengthened worker rights.** This priority includes increasing the minimum wage to at least \$15 per hour, robust paid sick leave for gig workers, and historic investment in child care facilities.
- **Advocate for equity-oriented workforce training programs.** Ensuring equity requires establishing workforce data systems that account for how much structures and policies mitigate—or reinforce—employment bias.
- **Support efforts to identify policies that compensate for historical economic disenfranchisement.** Redlining, exclusion from job opportunities and federal programs, disenfranchisement, and employment barriers resulting from disproportionate incarceration—along with centuries of forced labor—laid the foundation for present-day wealth gaps that affect health, education, housing, and employment outcomes. We will support efforts to address reparations as a means for

confronting the legacy of racist, exploitative economic policies.

Regionally YI will:

- In **Colorado**, YI will support efforts to modernize worker protections for gig workers.
- In **Illinois**, YI will advocate for a Young Workers' Bill of Rights and support raising awareness of career pathway opportunities among frontline workers with foster youth and youth emerging from the justice system.
- In **Texas**, YI will advocate for expanding work-based learning opportunities and apprenticeships, while connecting young adults to degree programs with on-the-job training, and ensure programs are designed to be equitable.

STRENGTHEN SOCIAL PROGRAMS TO ADDRESS BASIC HUMAN NEEDS

Even before the pandemic, the federal safety net was a misleading metaphor for the complex but porous web of programs and policies meant to help low-income people. Rather than catching Americans before they fall into financial ruin, assistance programs have left millions of Americans still grappling with homelessness, eviction, food insecurity, and an inability to afford medicine or care for themselves and their loved ones. Forcing people into low-wage jobs as a condition of safety net programs hurts workers and limits their ability to access education and training, hamstringing businesses looking to hire trained workers, and hurts regional and local economies.

To make the economy work well for people most marginalized by our economic and workforce policies to date, we as a nation must patch our safety net by eliminating unnecessary restrictions and increasing the amount of financial assistance that we provide to help young adults thrive.

Federally, YI will:

- **Advocate for increased federal direct assistance programs and improved federal tax credits.** This investment should include expanding eligibility and funding for the Earned Income Tax Credit, removing earnings requirements and increasing funding for the Child Tax Credit, and shifting the policy narrative to an outcomes-based model.
- **Advocate for expanded access to our nation's safety net programs.** This expanded access should include eliminating punitive eligibility requirements for SNAP, increased funding for SNAP Employment and Training (E&T), and reforming TANF.

Regionally YI will:

- In **California**, YI will advocate for increasing Cal-EITC allocation and in favor of universal basic income proposals for all Californians during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- In **Illinois**, YI will advocate for a modernized tax system that enables young people to make better-informed decisions. YI Illinois will also work towards increasing funding for young adults that helps low- and no-income jobseekers afford the transportation, equipment, and child care costs they take on when they enter the labor market.

Civic Engagement

According to the latest data, between 52%-55% of voting-eligible young people, ages 18-29, cast a ballot in the 2020 presidential election, including more than 10 million early and absentee ballots.¹² While young voters overall had high turnout, young people of color played an especially critical role. In fact, in states like Georgia and Arizona, Black and Latino youth were single-handedly the deciding factor.

Young Invincibles is committed to amplifying the voices of young adults by expanding opportunities to participate in the political process--and that includes voting. To that end, we are focused on championing federal and state legislation to protect and expand young adult voting rights.

YI will continue to work to support external partners and allies in efforts to increase access to the ballot box through automatic voter registration, online voter registration, promotion of on-campus voter engagement, and early in-person voting efforts.

Endnotes

- 1 Turner, Margery Austin, “Economic Hardships from COVID-19 Are Hitting Black and Latinx People Hardest. Here Are Five Actions Local Leaders Can Take”, Urban Institute, August 2020, Retrieved from: <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/economic-hardships-covid-19-are-hitting-black-and-latinx-people-hardest-here-are-five-actions-local-leaders-can-take>
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