Youth Fields Workforce Perspectives

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The place of out-of-school time programming in supporting young people's learning and growth is well established. Yet little is known about the staff and volunteers who support young people in school- and community-based afterschool programs, summer camps, national and local youth-serving organizations, and more.

The Youth Fields Workforce Study is a national effort to explore, define, and elevate the work of professionals and volunteers in an expansive range of youth-serving organizations. With support from The Wallace Foundation, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) led a constellation of partners, including the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST), in this study of the youth fields workforce.

A major part of the study is the Power of Us Workforce Survey, designed to learn about youth workers and their experiences in the field. The survey, which ran from February 2022 through March 2023, gathered data from thousands of youth fields professionals

across the country. In addition to soliciting detailed demographic information about respondents, the survey asked about respondents' current role and type of organization, career trajectory, professional learning opportunities, experiences on the job, professional values and needs, and professional certifications and associations.

This series of Perspectives, developed by NIOST researchers, supplements the data from the survey.

Goals

Based on interviews with youth-serving professionals, the Perspectives that follow highlight the broad range of voices in the youth fields workforce. Its goals are to:
- Deepen insight into the data from the Power of Us survey
- Explore the nuances of youth professionals' work experiences
- Elevate practitioners' voices, highlighting their experiences and challenges
- Investigate similarities and differences in youth work in diverse employment sectors
- Raise awareness of this workforce and its value

We call this series Perspectives because it captures the perspectives of youth fields professionals on critical workforce issues. Each Perspective explores a single workforce issue or sector:
Perspective 1: Community institutions
Perspective 2: Summer
Perspective 3: Entry points and recruitment
Perspective 4: Compensation
Perspective 5: Career pathways
Perspective 6: Recommendations

In addition to highlighting the experiences and opinions of youth-serving professionals, each Perspective points to promising directions for future research, policy, and practice. Our hope is that the findings from our interviews, together with results from the Power of Us Workforce Survey, will inspire leaders and policymakers to better support this vital workforce in transforming the lives of young people.

Methods

For most of the Perspectives in this issue, the research team randomly selected interview participants from a list of volunteers who had completed the Power of Us Workforce Survey before December 2022. After using a random number generator to select participants, we worked to ensure that the selected interviewees represented the general profile of the volunteer sample in terms of race, gender, age, years in the field, and region of the country. Table A on the next page outlines the demographics of the sample of 62 interviewees.

We developed a semi-structured interview protocol based on a review of previous studies that addressed out-of-school time and youth fields workforce issues (Cornerstones for Kids, 2006; Hall et al., 2020; Morrow, 2000; Vasudevan, 2019; Whitebook et al., 1989; Whitebook et al., 2014; Yohalem et al., 2010). We added our own collective professional knowledge of workforce trends and issues in the field to inform the questions.

All interviewees were asked a core set of questions pertaining to their current work and professional identity; entry into the field and career pathway; benefits and challenges of their work; professional development; compensation; diversity, equity, and inclusion; and recommendations. Subsets of interviewees were asked additional questions relevant to their sector or time in the field, as reflected in Perspective 1 on community institutions, Perspective 2 on summer programming, and Perspective 5 on career pathways. Some interview questions were refined over time with additional prompts. The individual Perspectives pieces describe the youth-serving professionals whose responses are included in that piece.

The virtual one-on-one interviews, which lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, were conducted from April 2022 through April 2023. They were recorded, with respondent permission, and then transcribed. Researchers worked together to develop a coding structure based on the interview questions and their experience conducting the interviews. Using NVivo software, two trained researchers coded and analyzed data to note patterns and differences in responses. Through the coding, they organized thematic groupings of the interview content. A member of the research team who was not involved in interviewing or coding reviewed the themes for quality, consistency, and clarity. In the Perspectives that follow, we report not only on major themes but also on subthemes and notable ideas that may have been mentioned by only a few interviewees.

Respondents worked in a variety of youth field sectors: national and local youth-serving organizations; school-based and university-based programs; summer camps; parks and recreation or outdoor education programs; libraries, museums, faith-based organizations, and housing organizations; programs focused on the

Table A. Respondent Demographics

Characteristic	Number
Female	41
Male	14
Non-binary	3
Unknown	4
Asian	2
Black or African American	11
Hispanic or Latinx	5
Multiracial	8
White	33
Unknown	3
High school diploma	7
Associate's degree	4
Bachelor's degree	27
Master's degree or higher	19
Unknown	5
1–5 years in field	10
6–10 years in field	22
11–15 years in field	7
More than 15 years in field	22
Unknown	1
20–30 years old	25
31–40 years old	16
41–50 years old	10
51–60 years old	3
Over 60 years old	2
Unknown	6
Northeast	15
Mid-Atlantic	6
Southeast	4
Midwest	16
South Central	5
Mountain	5
West	11
Staff working directly with youth	37
Director	10
Organization leader	11
Other	4
Full-time	47
Part-time	11
Other	1
Unknown	3

N = 62

arts, juvenile justice, health, and workforce development; and statewide afterschool networks.

The perspectives of our interviewees offer insight into the variety of ways in which youth field professionals experience their work and cope with the challenges. Though their experience is varied, their recommendations tend to converge on a few key points. We hope that raising up these recommendations will inspire policymakers to listen to the voices of the people who are "on the ground" doing the work that transforms young people's lives.

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Perspectives 1:
Youth Fields Professionals in Community Institutions

It is easy to form a mental image of a traditional afterschool program at a local elementary or middle school, one that offers families much-needed childcare as well as enrichment activities for children after the school day ends. High schools, too, may offer programs that engage teens in arts, sports, or employment.

Young people also learn and grow outside of school in community-based organizations that take youth development as their core mission or a central offering. These valuable school- and community-based programs are fairly visible to the public, as are some of the professionals who work in them.

However, young people are also served and nurtured in settings that have primary functions other than youth development, such as libraries, faith-based organizations, museums, and housing organizations. Families may regularly find themselves checking out books or accessing technology at their local library; engaging in family- or child-oriented programs at their place of worship; exploring art, science, or history at a nearby museum; or living in a housing community that offers support for family well-being. In many settings, programming aimed at fostering the emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual development of young people has blossomed organically over time, often woven into the institution's historical fabric. Young people in these institutions thrive on the dedicated work of professionals who respond to a calling to work with youth.

This Perspectives article explores reflections from professionals who work on behalf of children and youth in libraries, museums, faith-based organizations, and housing organizations. Their comments offer insight into the variety of ways in which professionals work with youth and reveal unique features and operational approaches that contribute to a high-functioning youth support ecosystem.

Methods and Sample

See the introductory article Youth Fields Workforce Perspectives for the full Perspectives methodology and a list of research team members.

Interviewees for this Perspectives article, unlike those for most other topics, were purposively recruited from the research team's networks and not from respondents to the Power of Us Workforce Survey. We recruited youth-serving professionals in four kinds of institutions: libraries, museums, faith-based organizations, and housing organizations. After inviting youth workers in our networks, we randomly selected participants from among those who expressed interest in participating. We conducted virtual interviews with these 11 participants in spring 2022.

Most participants reported that they worked full-time in their institutions: seven worked as directors, managers, or coordinators and four worked directly

Table 1. Respondent Demographics

Characteristic	Number
Female	9
Male	2
White	8
African American	3
Latinx	2
Age 20–30	4
Age 31–40	3
Age 41–50	2
Age 51–60	2
High school diploma	2
Bachelor's degree	5
Master's degree or higher	4

N = 11

with youth. Two were working in programs in libraries, two in museums, three in faith-based organizations, and four in housing organizations. Participants reported on their time in the field: two had spent 0–2 years in the field, three 5–10 years, one 10–15 years, and five more than 15 years.

Community Institutions as Part of the Youth Fields Ecosystem

Libraries

Public libraries are well-known local community institutions on which families and individuals rely for free access to books, technology, and information. Libraries have always adapted to and adopted new technologies; today they are increasingly functioning as community centers as they innovate new uses for their buildings, such as maker spaces, collaborative work stations, and cafés (Digital Public Library of America, n.d.).

According to the American Library Association (n.d.), children's and youth librarians fulfill a wide array of roles beyond their traditional tasks of promoting literacy and nurturing habits of reading. They also design and deliver engaging activities that help young people develop their creativity, interests, and talents. Our interviewees expressed appreciation for the freedom they have to plan and implement their own unique programming, which they deliver after school, during school vacations, and during the day for homeschoolers and preschool children. One interviewee talked about designing story times with songs and books for preschoolers, arts and crafts activities for school-aged children, and a graphic novel club for teens, as well as book talks or STEM programming for school groups.

Museums

With nearly 900 million visitors each year, natural history museums, zoos, aquariums, science museums, and art and cultural institutions have deep, longstanding, and far-reaching ties with communities (American Alliance of Museums, n.d.a). Museums are trusted "community anchors" that serve the whole public, often partnering with schools; together, they spend over $2 billion annually on educational activities (American Alliance of Museums, n.d.b).

For children and youth, early introduction to a museum might come through a field trip, family outing, or outreach event facilitated by the museum or

a school. Though these introductions may create a first experience, the museum youth-serving professionals we interviewed said that they contribute to children's learning and well-being in much deeper ways. They facilitate a broad menu of continuous learning and discovery experiences for children, youth, and adults across the developmental spectrum. According to the American Alliance of Museums (n.d.c), many museum professionals are advocating to be recognized for their role in education and to be included in education policy discussions.

Faith-Based Organizations

Faith-based youth programs are affiliated with organizations such as mosques, temples, or churches. These organizations, which often have lengthy histories in communities, provide cross-generational experiences. Our interviewees confirmed that faith-based organizations serve young people not only through religious education, but also through afterschool and mentoring programs, as well as clubs, choirs, and service-learning opportunities. These institutions may even provide social, educational, and employment services (Ericson, 2001).

Sector-Hopping

"Maria" has moved through several youth fields sectors, gaining skills and experience she has brought with her to the next sector. For example, she learned the classroom management skills she uses in her current position at a housing organization in a previous position with a national afterschool and summer program.

Frustrated with lack of time to serve young people's needs, Maria doesn't plan to stay in her current position. However, she says, "I do intend to always work with kids."

Maria reflects on her own childhood as she envisions how she can best serve young people in the future. She feels she would have struggled less in school if she could have learned through art, where her true passion lies. That's why her goal is to found her own nonprofit to teach math and science through art.

Faith-based programs often have established relationships, credibility, and trust with families and communities (Ericson, 2001). The faith-based youth-serving professionals we interviewed understood their work as an expression of their faith. They talked about their intense focus on serving the whole child and about helping children and youth develop, with special attention to social and emotional learning.

Housing Organizations

Public or affordable housing communities and shelters typically aim to protect families from homelessness and housing instability. To that end, they often provide an array of services in addition to housing, such as employment, financial stability, education, and health services. Young people in affordable housing communities often face significant health and educational challenges and a lack of resources (Treskon & Popkin, 2017). Our interviewees from housing organizations said that their organizations' comprehensive approach to their mission to help families achieve long-term success and financial sustainability includes programming for children and youth.

Youth-serving professionals in housing organizations literally serve young people and families where they live. These professionals often offer on-site after-school programming, summer learning, tutoring, and mentoring to support academic and social and emotional skill-building, along with trauma-informed care (Simonton, 2018). Our interviewees said that their responsibilities also involving meeting with families and connecting families to other resources.

Listening to Youth Fields Professionals

All 11 interviewees saw themselves as educators who focus on young people's development and well-being through experiences that supplement and connect to school learning. Four themes emerged in the interviews.

Dual Identities and Unique Strengths

The youth-serving professionals in these four types of community institutions recognized the multifaceted nature of their work with youth. Eight of the 11 interviewees described dual identities: They had expertise in both youth development and an area of specialty appropriate to their community institution, such as artist or religious mentor. Most embraced this aspect of their role.

The two museum interviewees noted that museum youth program professionals often have a teaching or subject specialization within the museum's focus, so that they are qualified as artists, scientists, or historians in addition to their roles as youth fields professionals.

The four housing organization interviewees spoke about the complexity of working with youth and families struggling with unemployment, poverty, and trauma. They pointed out that their jobs had both social work and youth development aspects. One professional in a housing and homelessness services program shared:

> I feel confident identifying as a youth worker, and I'm confident bringing those perspectives to conversations about housing and homelessness and stability and poverty. I think that youth work runs through and can run through almost every field where you work with people. And so … having had the opportunity to reflect on that and really figure out what I believe, I now feel able to come in and advocate for young people regardless of the context.

Similarly, all three interviewees in faith-based programs pointed to their organization's distinctive and historic orientation toward working with children and youth beyond the boundaries of religious programming. One commented:

> I think we're uniquely suited to look at the whole being of a child—helping them to grow emotionally and socially and spiritually and to help them look at the cultural context that we live in, and how to show up in brave ways.

Feeling Overlooked as Providers of Youth Programming

Eight interviewees, representing all four kinds of organizations, voiced feelings of being overlooked as legitimate providers of youth programming. At least one interviewee in each of the four sectors expressed a sense that the public sees their institutions as one-dimensional: Libraries do books, faith-based organizations do religion, and so on. One librarian discussed the need to correct these assumptions so that children and families can better engage in programming:

> We are a center of education, while also being a fun place for culture … bringing in art exhibits … programs about different countries … musical groups. People have this preconceived notion that we're still a very quiet shushing place. We've been trying to dispel some of those preconceived notions of people who have children. [We say]

"You're bringing your kids here. You need to know that this is meant to be a dynamic space, and we're not your grandparents' library anymore."

Working at the nexus of social services, human well-being, and youth development, two housing professionals shared that they sometimes struggle to help outsiders understand their role. One explained:

I think what's hard is … youth work is sort of nebulous. I think in some ways we're in an awkward place [in housing and homelessness services] because we are not an intervention program, but we exist in an intervention field. I think [it is a challenge] trying to have those discussions with people who aren't youth workers, and to tell the story … that the work that we do is youth work but is also housing work, even though it doesn't look like a traditional intervention.

All three youth ministry interviewees pointed to a general community misconception that youth programming in faith-based organizations primarily focuses on religion and beliefs, rather than on youth development principles and priorities. One faith-based interviewee explained that schools, in particular, often see religious entities as liabilities instead of assets. Part of this respondent's work is to show how their work adds value to the young people they serve and to the school community, in ways that are clear and measurable.

Similarly, a museum youth educator noted the importance of helping the community see the museum as a resource to support children and families:

I think there's a lot of variety going on in the type of education that museums provide, even art museums. All of our instruction isn't just studio work focused. Even in a history museum, it's not just importing facts about the dates of specific things that happened. And so I think we often are just trying to be seen as a resource for that kind of creative engagement in our various communities and for individuals.

Valuing Professional Learning

All 11 interviewees spoke about the importance of professional development, training, and support. Two cited on-the-job training as the most helpful. One library professional commented, "Almost none of what you need to know to do this job you will learn in the graduate program." Three others commented on the value of peer-learning opportunities, such as communities of practice, either within or outside the organization. One museum youth educator shared:

I think it can be really helpful to have groups of people who are working in the same field for support, but also to bounce ideas off of. And it's really valuable to have those kinds of people to talk to you, who work in different institutions—kind of a reality check on what problems are not going to go away … what's possible.

Three interviewees said that their supervisor supported their professional development, including financial support, even for professional development delivered outside the organization. These interviewees felt supported by the availability of trainings, especially when they felt unprepared for specific aspects of youth work, such as managing challenging behaviors or helping with young participants' social and emotional needs.

Feeling Challenged by Low Compensation and Lack of Funding

Six interviewees, representing housing organizations, museums, and faith-based programs, explicitly referred to the challenges of low compensation. One commented, "You work afterschool programs, they usually want to give me $9, $10, $11, at most $12 now, and maybe that works for students—college students. But that doesn't work for an adult."

Two interviewees described the stranglehold that budget insecurity and lack of funding placed on their ability to carry out their mission, though they acknowledged that the magnitude of the challenge could vary depending on a program's funding streams. A museum youth educator shared some challenges of limited budgets:

Our education programs are really key to a lot of what we do and, obviously, are key to what I do because of my role, but I think we try to be a very community-focused institution too, in addition to having exhibitions that draw in people who are visiting the city. It can be very frustrating to work at a smaller institution, mostly because of a lack of resources and the kind of the structural support that I imagine you might get … with a ton of money.

Important Members of the Youth Fields Ecosystem

The voices reflected in this Perspective offer insight into the variety of settings in which professionals work with young people. Society has traditionally seen the youth fields through discrete lenses—for example, school-based and community-based afterschool programs, school-age childcare programs, and youth development programs for teens. As illustrated by the interviewees contributing to this Perspective, the youth fields are complex, with multiple philosophies and funding streams. The public may not generally recognize people who work in libraries, museums, faith-based organizations, and housing organizations as youth-serving professionals. However, these professionals clearly are a critical part of a well-functioning youth fields ecosystem.

Work with children and youth outside of school is still developing as a professional field. Emerging definitions of the youth fields could benefit from a broad view that includes more youth-serving professionals rather than fewer. Those who are developing the field can leverage the strengths of youth-serving professionals working in institutions whose primary mission is something other than youth development, starting by helping these professionals to claim their place in the youth fields. Only by considering the diverse nature of the workforce and what youth-serving professionals in diverse organizations need to do their jobs well can the field optimize the collective impact of the workforce. Acknowledging their contribution can help to create a cultural shift toward valuing our young people and the people who work to help them thrive. Ultimately, youth-serving professionals in all sectors should be able to situate themselves in the larger field and recognize the strengths and unique qualities of the particular settings in which they work.

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Perspectives 2:
The Summer Youth Fields Workforce

Each year, millions of children and youth participate in a variety of summer opportunities including learning and enrichment programs, sports programs, camps, jobs, and internships (Allen & Noam, 2022; America After 3PM, 2021).

Even accounting for variations in experiences, research consistently has shown that summer programs can:
- Promote positive peer and staff relationships (Forum for Youth Investment, 2021)
- Improve academic and social and emotional skills (Forum for Youth Investment, 2021)
- Promote physical and emotional safety (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019)
- Promote physical and mental well-being (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019)
- Address opportunity and achievement gaps (Browne, 2019)
- Enable participants to explore their passions or discover new interests by trying activities to which they might not otherwise be exposed (Allen & Noam, 2022)

Though summer programming includes elements of traditional afterschool programming, it also faces unique challenges. Summer programs may have a hard time getting staff to come back summer after summer; this lack of continuity increases the time and funds needed for recruitment, onboarding, and training (Richmond et al., 2020; Schwartz et al., 2021). Richmond et al. (2020) note that 40 percent of camp workers surveyed cited low compensation as the reason for leaving camp positions for other jobs. Research has demonstrated that summer programs have had to adjust program approaches and policies to fit staffing levels. Some summer providers have attempted to raise wages (MOST Network, 2022). Others have decreased the number of youth served, cut hours, or even closed programs (Feinberg, 2022; Sullivan, 2022)—all of which reduce families' access to summer programming.

To discover how youth fields professionals perceive the challenges and rewards of summer work, the research team asked interviewees about their experiences in summer programs. Staffing issues peculiar to summer work dominated discussions of challenges; insights about benefits of summer youth work revealed why professionals continue in this field despite the challenges.

Methods and Sample

See the introductory article Youth Fields Workforce Perspectives for the full Perspectives methodology and a list of research team members.

This Perspective is informed by 20 interviews the research team conducted in spring and summer 2022. Participants were randomly invited from a list of volunteers who had completed the Power of Us Workforce Survey before June 2022. Table 2 displays respondent demographics.

Table 2. Respondent Demographics

Characteristic	Number
Female	13
Male	5
Nonbinary	1
White	13
African American	2
Latinx	2
Multiracial	2
Age 20–30	7
Age 31–40	6
Age 41–50	3
Age 51–60	1
High school diploma	1
Bachelor's degree	13
Master's degree or higher	6

N = 20. Where categories do not add up to 20, some respondents did not answer the question.

Interviewees had a range of work experience. Eight had 10 or fewer years of experience, and 12 had more than 12 years in the field. Twelve participants worked directly with youth and had some managerial responsibilities. Five were directors with responsibility for guiding programming and staff as well as connecting with youth, and three were organizational leaders with oversight responsibilities. Three participants each worked in national youth-serving organizations, summer camps, school-based organizations, and local youth-serving organizations. Two were in parks and recreation or outdoor education programs. One interviewee each worked in of the following sectors: faith-based, library, housing, and university-based programs.

The Life-Saving Impact of Summer Camp

"Grace" describes herself as having been "at risk" as a teen. "I was homeless, and I got a job at a summer camp because I needed a place to live, and you get to sleep in a cabin, and they give you food, and it's super fun." At the time, she focused more on her own needs than on those of the children: "I would love to say I just wanted to give back to the children, but I was 17. I don't want to give back to anyone. I was just, like, 'Is the food free?'"

But Grace found that she was "really good at" working with youth and that camp felt like a community. So she stayed, working her way up through the ranks at the same camp. Today, her experience as a teen motivates her to give back: "My teen years were definitely rough, and I want to help all the kids that have it rough."

Listening to Youth Fields Professionals

Whether working in overnight camps or full-day summer programs, interviewees reported both challenging and fulfilling experiences. Interviewees spoke about difficulties around staff recruitment, retention, and training and offered ideas for improving these processes. They also spoke plainly about the long hours and intense demands of summer programs, describing the toll these stresses can take on staff.

At the same time, many noted the creative, fun, and engaging aspects that make summer programming alluring to both young people and staff. Interviewees spoke—sometimes in near unison—about what they love about summer work, including opportunities to engage in powerful relationships with young people, bring their passions and creativity to the work, and learn transferable skills.

Staff Recruitment

Of the 20 interviewees, 18 described challenges with recruiting staff for summer programs. One leader of a large youth-serving organization summarized the problem:

> I do think staffing is a struggle.… You hire all college kids, and then they leave and then they come back, and so it's just this constant ebb and flow of people leaving and coming. I mean, we don't ever take down our position posting because we're just hiring all the time.

Three participants indicated that recruiting entry-level workers was a challenge because even fast-food restaurants in their area offered a higher wage.

One common recruiting strategy reported by nine interviewees was connecting with local colleges and universities. Five interviewees, while noting that their program had well-established partnerships with institutions of higher education, also expressed interest in strengthening partnerships to fulfill their staffing needs. For example, one said:

> We've been trying for a long time to get on our local colleges' career pages right and be very close with the college career departments. I don't think that it is as strong as it could be, so I think we have some work to do there.

Six interviewees cited the use of online platforms to post open positions. One noted that their organization's posts on social media attract attention and interest, saying, "I know we get a lot of people just because of the good that we do in the community, so I think the more that that's on social media … the more that that's out there."

Four interviewees talked specifically about hiring past participants to work in their programs. One program director described the pipeline this way:

> "We'll … have a kid … come to our afterschool program in sixth grade. When they're in high school, they'll do one of our volunteer camps, and

then, when they're older, in high school, they'll be, like, "Hey, I've been going to your programs for five years. Can I have a job?" I'm, like, "Sure, come on in."

A camp director noted, "We pull a lot of alumni into our staff," with about 40 percent of staff having come through the program.

Training

All 20 interviewees commented on staff training difficulties. Five interviewees particularly pointed to the tight timeline between hiring and the start of programs, which can often be just a few days as school-year programs end and summer programs begin. One said, "This summer was for us one of the hardest summers. It took us so long to hire that it cut our staff training down so much." Another, from a large youth-serving organization running a day camp in a school, said:

There's never enough time to train. Even the best staff training is still not going to make the people running the program prepared. The school doesn't allow us in until the day before camp starts. So, we have to set up a ten-week camp in one day.

That interviewee was one of several who noted that many workers have to learn while doing. This respondent described "hands-on" training that involved "running through a mock day … to see the flow of how it's going to work—not just talking about games and team-building things, [but actually] doing them." Eight other interviewees mentioned a similar strategy in which trainers modeled real-life program scenarios to help new staff prepare for what they might experience. A residential summer camp director described a discrepancy between what new staff members needed and the amount of training they could provide: "They needed a lot more training and … caring for our youth…. That was kind of one aspect of my job that I didn't really have time for but had to make time for."

Working Hours

In contrast to other youth programs, summer programs typically host young people for full days or overnight for one or more weeks. A recent study found that camp employees who left their jobs said they felt burned out by the long hours and the emotional toll of the work (Richmond et al., 2020). Nine interviewees, including five who worked directly with youth and four directors or organizational leaders, referenced the difficulty of

coping with long hours of programming. The director of a summer day camp run by a community-based organization said:

There just needs to be more time to be able to check in with staff and really see our rhythms going. You can't expand their schedule into a forty-five-hour week…. I'm salaried … and I work at least an extra month unpaid, and there's no compensation, there's no extra money … so I think it really does lead to burnout.

Another day-program director noted:

Our part-time staff is pretty much working full-time hours. Traditionally, we have two shifts, but this year everyone's working at least seven and a half hours a day. We just couldn't fill all the positions for two shifts. But we still had to run summer camp.

The leader of a residential camp organization said:

I think that most people who work in camps, especially the top management…. It's an incredibly stressful job, and I can feel myself aging…. I want

Running a Small Camp Requires a "Huge Skillset"

"Jeanne" is the director of a small content-oriented summer camp. Because the camp is small, it does not have dedicated staff for fundraising, communication, registration, or facilities management—Jeanne and her spouse do it all. She says, "Anybody who works in camp has to be able and willing to plunge the toilet, but then you also have to know how to write really firm procedures and execute those procedures."

In addition to logistical and administrative tasks, Jeanne uses her people skills in work directly with youth. "We joke that the directors often serve as the therapist for the kids," she says, adding that, since COVID, much of the camp's professional development—which she also manages—has focused on "first aid mental health for youth." The downside is that she works 16 hours a day, "seven days a week for about 150 days in a row without a day off."

to stay as long as I can, but I think that's not much longer. We talk often with other industry professionals about how it's really not a sustainable life, but it is very rewarding. So it's killing us very slowly, but it's really rewarding.

Relationship Building

With the longer hours of summer programming come expanded opportunities for staff to build relationships with young people. Sabo Flores (2018), working with the American Camp Association, noted that "camps are extraordinary places to cultivate relationships," creating "powerful connections because they provide a unique environment for learning and daily opportunities to bond with others." Richmond et al. (2020) found that employees cited the impact they have on campers and seeing campers develop over time as reasons they continue to work in the summer setting. All but one interviewee talked extensively about their connections with young people and the impact of their work on youth outcomes. For example, a residential summer camp director said:

> A lot of kids come here and they say, "Oh, it was the best two weeks of my life." The community that we're able to form is also incredibly inclusive. Everybody who works at our camp … has this wonderful opportunity to give kids experiences that are really life shaping. And it's also just incredibly fun. We work long days but … it's very rewarding.

One staffer at a residential camp for children with special needs spoke about the relationships of special-needs children with their volunteer youth "buddies":

> There is such a neat story in the relationships that are built between a buddy and their camper … seeing their eyes kind of open to this world, recognizing that this world is so big, and the people in it are so beautiful. They … get out of their little bubble in order to see that at camp. That's really special.

Creativity and Learning

Despite the challenges, some employees eagerly jump into summer programming and continue to return from summer to summer. Some interviewees suggested that the opportunities for creativity and exploration that young people enjoy in summer programs are equally motivating for staff. A staffer with a community-based summer day camp said:

> We're all here to serve the kids. I feel like that's …

the main thing, see them create things, get excited about things, embrace their confidence and embrace the ownership of "I am an artist and I can create words, and I can be a proactive citizen and my voice matters and my work matters" and things like that. I love that.

An interviewee with a school-based program that operated during both the school year and the summer said that summer:

> … was just much more relaxed. When you have the kids all day, you've got so much more time to experiment and have fun and do things with them versus the three hours we had in the afternoon or two hours we had in the morning.

Some research shows that the opportunity to try new curriculum and approaches, such as project-based learning and other hands-on activities, can be as exciting for staff as for young participants (Browne, 2019). In a study of the role of creativity in the experience of camp counselors, Lynch et al. (2020) found that the chance to try new things gave staffers the sense that their work environment supported their creativity and gave them a voice; they therefore were satisfied with their work and self-motivated.

Eleven interviewees said that staff members' ability to bring their passions and interests to their work kept them motivated. The director of a school-based day camp described an effort to engage staff members' interests:

> Essentially we had teachers come up with their own activities that they wanted to do. It started a little bit last summer where they had a teacher who wanted to do rocketry…. When someone is able to bring something from their own life to the table, bring their own passions—the more that you put in, the more the kids get out of it. So he was into rocketry—he loved that, he was passionate about it. It showed, and the kids fed off it, and they loved it.

An outdoor education employee described a conscious effort to design around staff members' and summer participants' interests:

> So we basically restructured it, and we all ended up with what our interests were…. We had a very loose structure on what the objectives were, but for the most part [it was] choose your own adventure. And then that's what I love, too, about the

summer camp, because … every week was different…. Any given day, I have … a retired 70–plus-year-old person asking me for this, and I'm also teaching a two-year-old about what floats.

Transferable Skills

Duerden et al. (2014) found that employment at summer residential camps can help workers develop a sense of identity, grow life skills, and deepen personal relationships—skills that are transferable to other areas of life and other professions. Furthermore, the camp employees said that their summer employment influenced their professional pathways (Duerden et al., 2014). Sabo Flores (2018) suggests that summer camp employees gain the opportunity to hone important skills such as empathy, open-mindedness, and self-awareness, as well as a work ethic they can carry forward to any future job. The intensity of hours and breadth of relationships in summer youth work seem to translate into a medium for building vital skills.

Three interviewees talked extensively about their recognition of the value of summer youth work and connections to career pathways. A direct-service worker with a large youth-serving organization described connections with college studies:

> There's so many crossovers, whether you're in human development or education as a major, or you're in … environmental studies or recreation. There's a lot of skills that working with youth in a day camp … transferable things that you can take back to whatever field you're really interested in.

The director of a residential summer camp described the future value of skills employees gained at camp:

> I think there's this sense for a lot of people that are working in education or outdoor education or camp—that it is not real work because it's really fun for a lot of people. I think trying to find ways to show young people what the value of this work is, and the soft skills they develop, and the leadership skills.… Working in this team environment has incredible benefits for future careers and makes people really much better collaborating. I think one thing a lot of camps are working on is teaching people how to market their experiences working in an organization like this to their future careers.

An Important Season for the Youth Fields Ecosystem

Interviews confirmed the importance of the summer season to the youth fields ecosystem and its workforce. Benefits for youth professionals include expanded time for teaching and building relationships with youth, connections to their own interests and passions, and the opportunity to grow their asset inventory. Program leaders commonly face logistical challenges related to recruiting and training along with long work days for themselves and their employees. Their strategies for building staffing pipelines included establishing partnerships with colleges and universities and growing program participants into employees. Emphasizing the opportunity to develop transferable skills might be another recruitment strategy. Despite the challenges they face, summer youth workers view their season as a time to exert creative energy, build skills, and have a lasting impact.

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Perspectives 3:
Entry Points and Recruitment for the Youth Fields Workforce

Many fields are currently experiencing a workforce crisis. The youth fields, by contrast, have faced staffing shortages and high rates of turnover for decades (Yohalem et al., 2010). Recruitment and retention are key issues as directors look for strategies to keep their programs staffed and open at capacity. Some have increased pay, offered signing bonuses, and added other benefits to make jobs more attractive—but they still report staffing challenges (Afterschool Alliance, 2022).

How and why people find their way into the youth fields has significant implications for recruitment and retention. Researchers have explored factors that influence people to pursue careers in the youth fields and to stay once they are in (Borden et al., 2011; Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006; Hartje et al., 2008). People may join youth fields through formal preparation pathways, such as training in social work, education, public health, or youth development; others enter without youth-related formal education or training (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006). People may enter because they want to give back or make a difference in young people's lives, because of the influence of a role model, or because they need a stepping stone on a path to another youth-related career (Borden et al., 2011; Hartje et al., 2008). Attending to these varied entry points, widening them, and intentionally creating new ones to increase access are important steps toward strengthening the youth fields workforce.

This Perspective explores reflections from youth fields professionals on how they entered the field and why. Respondents also shared ideas about recruitment—what works and what could be improved. Their insights shed light on how the youth fields might leverage existing entry points and refine recruitment efforts.

Methods and Sample

See the introductory article Youth Fields Workforce Perspectives for the full Perspectives methodology and a list of research team members.

This Perspective is informed by 36 interviews the research team conducted in spring and summer 2022.

The researchers recruited participants largely from among people who responded to the Power of Us Workforce Survey, as well as from their own networks. Demographic information about the respondents is displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Respondent Demographics

Characteristic	Number
Female	24
Male	8
Nonbinary or no response	4
White	22
African American	5
Latinx	3
Asian	2
Multiracial	2
Age 20–30	10
Age 31–40	11
Age 41–50	7
Age 51–60	3
High school diploma	5
Bachelor's degree	18
Master's degree or higher	13

N = 36. Where categories do not add up to 36, some respondents did not answer the question.

Of the 36 respondents, five had been in youth fields for 0–5 years, eight for 6–10 years, six for 11–15 years, and 17 for more than 15 years. Respondents were working in programs run by schools, large youth-serving organizations, smaller community-based organizations, and community institutions. Twenty of them worked directly with youth, nine were directors, four were organizational leaders, and three held other roles, such as trainers.

Listening to Youth Fields Professionals

The 36 interviewees described their points of entry into youth work and their motivations for entering the field. We also asked them how their organizations could improve their recruitment strategies.

How: Entry Points

Patterns quickly emerged when interviewees described how they entered the youth fields. One-third of interviewees (13) described early life experiences—a positive experience at summer camp, in a church youth group, or at their local swim club—that drew them to work with youth. Some shared identity labels: "I was a club kid" or "I was a library kid." For some of these youth fields professionals, early involvement not only instilled positive associations with youth programming but also led to early work experiences as, for example, a counselor-in-training at a summer camp or a teen teacher of religion to younger children. These entry points then, for some, led to first jobs, sometimes at the same organization. A summer camp director described this process:

> For seven years before I started working at or started directing [this] camp, I was working at a Girl Scout sleepaway camp, and that was a program that, in addition to working there for seven years, I grew up there. Going there as a kid, I went through their counselor-in-training program and then their junior counselor program and then eventually sort of moved into seasonal work as a counselor.

An afterschool program director had a similar experience:

> Yeah, it's full circle for me. I grew up in the field, and there were different mentors … who were, like, "Hey, come on, and work your summer here" [at the programs I] used to come to as a kid. They recruited me—people that saw me as a kid at the summer camps.

An almost equal number of interviewees (12) used words like "accidental," "happenstance," or "chance" when talking about how they entered the field. They did not intentionally set out on a path to youth fields. For example, one experienced youth fields professional described the impact of having taken a job early on simply because it was convenient:

> I was 14 years old, and I lived close to a community center that was looking for some help during the holidays, because they had a lot of people that

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Tech Skills as a Way In and a Way to Serve Youth

"Henry" found his way into the youth fields after earning an MBA and working for a decade in the tech industry. "I knew that I wanted to do something in tech," he says, "but related to kids." He now manages a program that teaches programming and computer skills to young people of color.

Henry sees his own story as one that can guide the young people in his program: "A lot of our students need a mentor, but they also need to see a beacon, if you will: someone who's already done this. So, when I tell them, 'Hey, if you learn these skills, you can go anywhere in the world,' it's not just me saying something that sounds nice. It's not a platitude. You have someone who really looks like them who comes from their community who has actually done just that."

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were going on vacation. I started in that job and never left. It's so funny—before I walked into the community center I had a completely different life plan, and once I walked into that community center, literally life changed for me.

For 22 interviewees, early job experiences, whether accidental or intentional, led to a commitment to the field. One youth librarian described getting a part-time job during high school:

> We were visiting the library one day, and I happened to mention that I was looking for something to do, and they said, "Oh, well, we have an opening"—and 30 seconds later I had a part-time job, which was great and I loved it. That was 20 years ago. Yeah, I'm still here.

Another interviewee described taking a youth-serving position as a placeholder when they weren't sure what to do after college:

> I graduated, and that's when I was like, "I know for sure I don't want to do chemistry." So I got this part-time position.… It was really just, like, whoever took me, I guess I'll work for them, feel it out.… And so that's kind of how it started.

Twelve interviewees mentioned college experiences—courses, internships, jobs, or volunteer work—as the first concrete step on a youth fields career path. One said, "I went to study public health, and we had to do an internship with an organization of your choice. And I picked an organization that worked with an afterschool program. That was my first experience with youth work." For an interviewee who ended up in parks and recreation programming, coursework was the entry point:

> I decided to go back to school, and I really wanted to be a personal trainer and do kinesiology exercise science. And I went to go enroll, and the department was, like, "Yeah, we're actually full. But go into this major—recreation management—and after your first semester you can transfer over." And I found that after the first semester I completely forgot about my other passion of trying to be in the athletic training world.

Seven interviewees shared stories about being influenced by family members or friends. For example, one said their parent, who was a teacher, inspired them to pursue work with youth. Another was encouraged by a college friend who said, "You know, I work with this really cool organization. I think you would love this work. You should apply for this job."

Five interviewees described intentionally pursuing a career in the youth fields. Only one talked about always knowing they wanted to pursue a career in out-of-school time. Four others said that they knew they wanted to work with children and youth in some way. Two intentional paths were to pursue formal education or to work their way up in a youth-serving organization. One experienced youth-serving professional described the latter path:

> I had a few afterschool counselors who I really felt a connection with, and when I grew up, I wanted to either be a teacher or run an afterschool program. Once I was 15 I could be a [counselor in training], so I did that. I became a group leader. I was with the Boys & Girls Clubs for about 10 years.

One interviewee who knew they wanted to work with youth explained that they expected to teach music in an afterschool program:

> I always knew that I would work with young people in some way, shape, or form, but I just never thought that I would be this much in the frontline

at that time…. I thought I would probably be a music teacher and … have summers off.

Four interviewees said they shifted to youth fields when they became disillusioned with classroom teaching. For example, one said:

> I went to school; I did education and wanted to be a teacher, but then I realized [the school system] was too confined…. I get bored easily. And so I was introduced to the Boys & Girls Clubs, running a gym.

Why: Choosing the Youth Fields

Many interviewees articulated their "why"—their personal, internal motivations for getting involved in the youth fields. Echoing past research findings, 13 interviewees said they were driven by a desire to make a difference, give back, or create change. These interviewees expressed deep personal feelings of commitment to the work, feeling that they were "called" or "meant to do this work," which gave them a positive feeling of doing something worthwhile. One youth professional highlighted the needs of the children with whom they worked:

> And to me, the thought of just letting these kids swing in the breeze and land where they will, that's not okay with me. So I'll stay here forever until I'm too old to do it anymore. Because it's not right to just leave people without some kind of safety net. I'm not much, but I might be all that somebody has, and that's important to me.

Five interviewees said felt compelled by their own challenges in childhood. For example, this interviewee wanted to give other children the support they had received not from their family but from their afterschool program:

> I just think back to my own experience when I was younger, and I remember trying to work on my homework, and my parents only knew Spanish, so they couldn't help me. I remember feeling the anxiety and fear of not doing good in school and for not being able to finish my work. I think when I was younger I didn't receive that love and support, and so I can extend that love and forgiveness and support and patience to other youth—that's what I wanted to do, because I think the fact that I have that support system really helped me set me up for success in my own life.

Two interviewees referenced being drawn to the work because it was fun. One interviewee cited both fun and altruistic motives:

> You know, it feels good to feel respected and liked and that you're doing something that's bigger than yourself. I think that's what really got me; it was the first time I felt I needed to fill a role as a camp counselor. It was really fun. I had a lot of fun—everyone thought it was really fun.

Recruitment

The majority of interviewees (27) commented on recruitment, and 24 went on to describe recruitment strategies organizations could implement immediately or in the future. Ten participants mentioned increasing pay; five suggested increasing time off, adding other benefits such as gym memberships, or offering more stable hours. Fourteen interviewees mentioned recruiting at or partnering with colleges, a strategy that aligns with what some interviewees said brought them into youth fields.

Only five interviewees suggested appealing to people's desire to help. This number is surprisingly low given that so many people in the field and in these interviews point to a desire to help others as a key motivation. Similarly, only three interviewees mentioned hiring program alumni (sometimes referred to as a "grow-your-own" approach), a strikingly low number when so many said this path had been their own way into the field.

Eight interviewees commented on systemic strategies to support recruitment. For example, one interviewee talked about increasing the visibility of youth work to a broad audience:

> I think you have to start recruiting early, like in college or right out of college. And that's one of the reasons I hire college interns in the summer. I think a lot of people don't know what their options are in youth development. If you haven't done a program like that in your youth, you probably don't know about it. So I think exposure to what a career would look like [is helpful], and we don't do a great job of that. I don't see a lot of informal youth programs at career fairs.

Another spoke to the need for intentional recruitment in the absence of a national strategy:

> In order to prepare the workforce, there have to be very clear recruitment and retention strategies, whether it's recruiting those who are interested in the field of education or incentivizing working in out-of-school time. I think those are very important, because there isn't a national recruitment strategy. Everyone's working in silos on their own to get staff.

One interviewee was explicit about the need for the youth fields to be more valued by society so that people entering the labor market or changing careers can see youth-serving work as a viable career:

> I think if you show that this is a spot that we as a community, as a society, we honor and we're showing that by paying them fairly, being reasonable with policy and the things that we're asking you to do, then that would attract people to come to the profession or come back to the profession.

Another interviewee suggested marketing the value of skills learned in the youth fields that can be transferred to other sectors.

Strategies to Support the Youth Fields Workforce

Interviewees thoughtfully shed light on common entry points into the youth fields workforce and suggested ways leaders might refine recruitment efforts. Childhood experiences at camp and afterschool programs, along with counselor-in-training programs and internships, are influential experiences, moving some young people toward youth fields pathways. Part-time high school and college jobs also surface as key points of entry. Creatively working on recruitment efforts that target these pathways could help to shift the balance from accidental to intentional entry into the field.

However, youth-serving programs on their own are limited in their capacity to grow their own staff, develop partnerships with local colleges, and broadly market work opportunities to job seekers. Ultimately, the field needs a national strategy that not only guides people to entry points but also demonstrates that work with youth is a stable and worthwhile career aspiration.

Our interviewees revealed the passion and commitment that youth fields professionals bring to their roles. Their motivations are deeply felt. The strength of this commitment must be supported with fair compensation including benefits, professional development, and other workplace supports.

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Perspectives 4:
Compensation for the Youth Fields Workforce

Low compensation has been a consistent challenge for the youth fields workforce (Hall et al., 2020; Yohalem et al., 2010). Data from the Power of Us Workforce Survey will shed light on the current realities of how youth-serving professionals are compensated. In the meantime, data from related sectors provide some insight.

For example, research in early childcare (McLean et al., 2021) has revealed that 98 percent of workers in other occupations are paid more than childcare workers. The median wage for childcare workers is $27,000; 46 percent of workers have incomes low enough to qualify for public support (McLean et al., 2021).

Not unexpectedly, lack of adequate compensation in the youth fields restrains recruitment and retention of high-quality staff. Some providers have raised salaries or offered signing or retention bonuses as incentives (Editorial Projects in Education, 2022; Kidd, 2022). The Madison-area Out-of-School Time Network, in response to provider feedback, provided cash bonuses to direct-service workers. Follow-up data show that, six to 12 months later, 82 to 88 percent of these workers remained in their positions (Beck, 2022). The effectiveness of such strategies remains to be confirmed; many childcare, out-of-school time, and youth development programs report that, even after increasing compensation, they still struggle with recruiting and retaining staff (Coffey & Khattar, 2022).

How do youth-serving professionals view their compensation and its impact on their employment? What do they say about investments to support fair compensation? To find out, the research team interviewed youth-serving professionals from a variety of sectors. Respondents suggested that life stage may be a factor: As workers age or change life stages, low wages cannot support their needs. Interviewees also noted that compensation is not the only factor in job persistence; they cited other features of the youth fields they value when making career decisions.

Methods and Sample

See the introductory article Youth Fields Workforce Perspectives for the full Perspectives methodology and a list of research team members.

This Perspective is informed by virtual interviews with 40 youth workers conducted from spring 2022 to January 2023. Interview participants were randomly invited from a list of volunteers who completed the Power of Us Workforce Survey before December 2022. In addition to using a random number generator to select participants, we also selected interviewees to represent the survey sample in terms of race, gender, age, years in the field, and region of the country. Table 4 shows their demographic information.

Table 4. Respondent Demographics

Characteristic	Number
Female	28
Male	10
Nonbinary or no response	2
White	24
African American	6
Latinx	4
Asian	2
Multiracial	3
Age 20–30	14
Age 31–40	14
Age 41–50	7
Age 51–60	2
High school diploma	2
Bachelor's degree	22
Master's degree or higher	13

N = 40. Where categories do not add up to 40, some respondents did not answer the question.

Participants worked in programs run by schools, large youth-serving organizations, smaller community-based organizations, and community institutions. Of the 40 interviewees, five had 0–5 years in the field, 15 had 6–10 years, six had 11–15 years, 13 had more than 15 years, and one did not specify. Most reported working full-time; 23 were directors, managers, or co-ordinators; 16 worked directly with youth; and one indicated multiple role levels.

Listening to Youth Fields Professionals

All 40 interviewees in our diverse sample commented on compensation in some way. Many discussed the impact of low pay on their ability to recruit program staff or on their own career choices.

Low Pay

Thirty interviewees remarked that low pay is typical of youth work. One interviewee voiced a common concern about the mismatch between compensation and the quality of the work:

> I would say a big trend that I've seen across the board, at all of the out-of-school time places I've been a part, is that compensation doesn't match what I feel like I'm providing. For the quality of work and for the emotional labor that really goes into doing really, really awesome work with these populations of students, I don't feel the compensation is reflective of that.

Most interviewees were program supervisors or managers; they may have been earning a livable wage. However, they quickly pointed out that they had endured low pay in previous positions. For example, one supervisor said of an early job:

> My colleagues working part-time had master's level education and were still making the same part-time wages…. It was so challenging to show up every day and know, we are all highly educated people. We're all very skilled at our job. Yet we're making $12 an hour working 20 hours a week.

Several interviewees in supervisory positions cited the low wages of their staff. For example, one summer camp director said:

> We ask our staff to work incredibly hard. You know, they work dawn to dusk, and they have so many skills themselves that they're just constantly employing. We give them raises every year, and we try as much as we can to keep their salaries up, but

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Compensation Deeper Than a Paycheck

"Jamal" ties his current work to his experiences as a young adult. After struggling to find his way in college, he took a break to participate in an outdoor experiential education program. The program helped him find his motivation and re-engage with learning. Still, he floated through a series of unfulfilling jobs before he realized he could go to work at the outdoor education program in which he had participated.

The opportunity to facilitate the same transformation he felt as a youth sustains him in his work with that same outdoor education program today. He says that "that spark, that little connection of A to B, where they get it" makes all the challenges of experiential education worthwhile.

Despite back pain and "having to pull ticks off my legs at 3 in the morning," Jamal reflected on the value of facilitating transformation in young people: "Your tank could be on empty and, boom, you're right back at full." The work, he says, is "not always magic, but the fact that it sometimes is, is significant."

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they're really, really low, and if you thought about their work at an hourly rate, it's pretty shameful.

Eleven interviewees talked about taking on additional tasks or roles without additional pay. One supervisory-level interviewee expressed frustration:

> It's okay that I don't make a ton of money, but I should do the amount of work that reflects that amount of money versus, "Well, you're a manager and you're salaried, and so we're just going to give you as much work as possible that you can take on to save … money."

An interviewee who worked directly with youth attributed their sense of being overworked to the needs of program participants:

> Depending on what kind of work you do and the population that you work with, the ask is more. If

you're working with an at-risk population, you're doing much more than the normal 9 to 5, 10 to 6 job. You are really helping someone on the weekends. You are walking through how to fill out that application. That's at 8:00 p.m., because you're the person that they trust, and they are going to call upon you. So, definitely, I think it's the workload and pay rates that are the biggest problem.

A manager-level employee noted that the time and task demands during summer programming were leading to burnout:

I'm salaried, and the number of hours that I put in over the summer is sick. I work at least an extra month unpaid, and there's no compensation, there's no extra money. There's not even extra comp day or planned time off. So I think it really does lead to burnout, which I think I'm experiencing a little bit myself, which is really sad.

Low Recognition

Interviewees associated with low pay their sense that society does not value their work. One respondent, for example, talked about the disconnect between the importance of the work and the value implied in the compensation:

Teachers and youth workers I think are all, for sure, underpaid. You know, "Children are the future" is what a lot of people say, right? And so why wouldn't we compensate the people that are helping to mold the young people into good humans a better wage?

Another contrasted the value placed on youth fields work, as measured by pay, with the importance of the work and the skills and professionalism the work requires:

This kind of work … I don't think is compensated enough for working with young people and their families, having to be teachers and caregivers, and having families turning to us asking for help, trying to find support that they need. Then we see other people who I don't think do as much of a stressful job as we do, definitely getting a lot more. So I think we could actually be compensated a lot better.

Compensation and Equity

In early childcare, another low-paying sector, researchers have found a wage gap of $4,406 between Black and White center-based teachers (McLean et al., 2021).

A Volunteer Director: Passion vs Sustainability

For 20 years, "Janet" has served without taking a salary as the CEO of a program she founded. She has used her significant talent and passion to create a small but mighty program focused on African dance and culture. Over the years, she has invested her own money: "Whenever the organization runs short of its grants, I pop money in."

Janet is able to make this investment of time and money after retiring from an unrelated career. She considers the investment "selfish" because she is so passionate about the arts and culture, but she also sees it as a way to "give back" to the community. She is aware that her model is not sustainable, but she has not found funding to pay someone to do what she does. Right now, her plan is to keep running the program herself until "I'm closing my eyes and meeting my Maker."

Lloyd et al. (2021) outline how the historical context, tracing back to the enslavement of Africans, illuminates the current low pay and lack of value of the childcare workforce.

One interviewee, a Black female, linked the pay issue specifically with the needs of non-White and immigrant workers:

So they can't afford to take a $50,000 job when they live in a city that the minimum requirement to even have a two-bedroom [apartment] is $60,000 a year. They can't afford that because they are not paying for just themselves, they're paying for their family members back home. So I definitely see, especially if we want to diversify education, knowing that a lot of Black and brown people are first-generation college students, we're not going to get that diversity if we're not paying people.

Other interviewees noted that low pay influences who can afford to work in the youth fields. One, a White male, said that he could afford to be a youth worker only because he was in a dual-income family with no children. A White female noted of her past experience as a frontline worker:

I definitely think that on the system side, I needed a more equitable workplace. Because we were paying $10 an hour. So anybody who's able and willing to take that usually is not in a financial situation where they're dependent upon that job.

Compensation and Retention

Twenty-two interviewees pointed to pay as an important factor in their interest and ability to continue in youth work. One interviewee expressed a common sentiment: "If you're not getting paid that much, there's not a lot of incentive" to stay in the position. An interviewee who left youth work for another field and then returned cited compensation as one reason for leaving:

> That was half the reason why I took a step away, because I couldn't [volunteer my time]. And I remember saying ten years ago, when I stepped away, "When you guys can pay me a little bit, then I'll be back."

Another interviewee who had left a direct-service job for a research position also felt undercompensated, particularly after earning a master's degree:

> In terms of the work I was doing there, the compensation was not what I was looking for. I had just graduated with my master's and was looking for something more sustainable. I didn't know how to bring up that conversation. Well, I have, but they're not really willing to upgrade your pay. So that was one big setback.

Sentiment about the relationship between compensation and being able to stay on differed by age. One interviewee expressed a common sentiment: "Afterschool programs … usually want to give $9, $10, $11, at most $12 an hour, and maybe that works for college students. But that doesn't work for an adult." Several older workers said that they managed when younger with smaller salaries or multiple jobs, but now they had family responsibilities and financial commitments. Asked whether compensation affects their decision to stay in the field, one worker in their 30s answered:

> If you had asked me when I was 18 to 21 as a camp counselor, I would have said absolutely not. I do think that it's important, though. The older I get, the more I realized that I have long-term plans. I'd love to be able to save enough money to put a down payment on a house, maybe have a family, things like that. So I would say that it's definitely important to me that I'm able to earn enough that

I can support myself…. If I had to take a pay cut, I might need to consider other options.

Concerns about compensation increased after the COVID-19 pandemic, whose program and school closures resulted in staff shortages as laid-off workers moved to other employment. To address shortages, many policy leaders and advocates have been working to increase compensation. One interviewee saw a nominal increase in salary as a sign of being valued by their organization:

> I received a cost of living increase which … was nice. It's not a ton, but it's just, like, they "see" me. You know, they see that people are struggling, they see that gas has gone up this much, and they see that housing is out of control, and they care enough to say, "We can do this for you." So that means something, I think.

Interviewees also cited other forms of compensation, such as paid professional development or flexible work hours. Three interviewees spoke of appreciating wellness teams and additional time off that were added during the pandemic.

Motivation Beyond Compensation

As some interviewees noted, compensation is only one reason people enter and stay in youth work. Extrinsic and intrinsic factors, such as making an impact, relationships, and recognition, can also play a role (Hall et al., 2020; see also Perspectives 3). Three interviewees pointed to a passion for the work as their real inspiration, saying that this passion softens the burden of low pay. For one respondent, the answer to the question about why they work so hard for so little pay was, "Somebody has to do it." The work, they said, "is wonderful … rewarding … necessary." Another said they sacrificed higher pay for more meaningful work:

> Ultimately, I took a pay cut to come to this position, and I honestly didn't care. I like it…. I will figure out the financial aspects of it if I'm doing something that I love that I feel good about every day.

Systemic Change and Community Support

A large majority of interviewees (33) connected compensation challenges with the need for policy action. They said that funders and policymakers need to prioritize youth fields professionals and acknowledge the importance of their work by providing more resources for staff compensation.

A camp director noted a consistent disconnect between the cost of services and what people are willing to pay.

> If we had to charge parents what it actually would cost to compensate our staff at a fair rate, I think no one could afford to send their kids to camp. So there is this constant pull of, like, how can we pay our staff more, but also keep camp affordable and accessible to more people? And I don't think that any camp has figured it out yet.

Another interviewee used broad strokes to describe the need for more funding:

> So [we need] more money for people, leadership development programs that really focus on exceptional talent and putting those [people] into places in the communities that need it most, and just continuing to serve the urban underserved communities. I think it all just comes down to more funding and more resources for those folks.

Compensation: Necessary but Not Sufficient

Our conversations with youth-serving professionals made it clear that fair compensation is critical to the viability and growth of the youth workforce. Like any other workforce, youth fields professionals rely on an array of structural supports, including compensation, to thrive. In an earlier study, Hall et al. (2020) found that youth fields professionals cited financial stability, pay, and benefits as being the most important factors—and yet they perceived these factors as not being widely available to them. Our interviewees agreed that their work is purpose-driven and meaningful. Still, they see a significant gap between the value of their contribution to child and youth well-being on the one hand and their compensation on the other.

Policymakers and the leaders of youth-serving organizations need to address this gap aggressively. Starting points are to increase public funding, allocate available resources to staff compensation, and offer full-time salaries with benefits. Youth-serving professionals could also benefit from supports such as accessible and affordable professional development and mentorship opportunities, established career pathways, and positive work environments. Taken together, these changes could improve the professional experience and inspire long-term commitment to youth fields.

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Perspectives 5:
Youth Fields Career Pathways

No matter how they find their way into the youth fields (see Perspectives 3), many youth-serving professionals establish long and satisfying careers. Although turnover is a real concern (e.g., Afterschool Alliance, 2023; Wilkens, 2020), research and anecdotal evidence suggest that some people do find ways to sustain careers in the youth fields (National AfterSchool Association, 2015; Yohalem et al., 2010).

What do their career paths look like? What makes it possible for some people to stay in the youth fields while others leave?

Career paths in the youth fields are many and varied—there is no one easily defined path. The Colorado Afterschool Partnership (n.d.) outlines the advantages of "nonlinear" paths that are open to individuals from diverse backgrounds with diverse kinds of expertise. Following their own unique paths, youth fields professionals can build experience as needed both to enhance their ability to serve young people and to enrich their own lives.

Despite the advantages, the lack of clearly defined career paths means that people who are entering the workforce or looking to change careers may not identify work with youth as a career option or know how to get started if they do. Those who do find their way in may step out if they cannot see a clear path toward career advancement. Recognizing the lack of identifiable career paths as a barrier to recruitment and retention, out-of-school time organizations have highlighted varied career paths. Examples include the Colorado Afterschool Partnership (n.d.) feature on career paths and the National AfterSchool Association 2021 blog series "Stories That Shape Us." Youth fields researchers have also advocated for better-defined career paths (Borden et al., 2020; Russell & Butler, 2020; Yohalem et al., 2010).

This Perspective focuses on professionals who have sustained careers in the youth fields for at least 15 years. Their stories shed light on patterns that may help define career pathways. Their insights offer hints about factors that could have led them out of the field and what helped them to stay.

Methods and Sample

See the introductory article Youth Fields Workforce Perspectives for the full Perspectives methodology and a list of research team members.

The research team talked to 22 professionals who had at least 15 years in the youth fields. The interviewees for this Perspective were selected from among the full sample of 62 interviewees specifically for their length of service in youth fields. The research team added to the general interview protocol questions specific to the sustained nature of these respondents' careers. Table 5 outlines the demographic characteristics of the interviewees.

Table 5. Respondent Demographics

Characteristic	Number
Female	18
Male	3
White	14
Black or African American	6
Asian	1
High school diploma	2
Associate's degree	2
Bachelor's degree	11
Master's degree or higher	7

N = 22. Where categories do not add up to 22, some respondents did not answer the question.

All interviewees were over 30 years old: Six were 31–40; eight were 41–50, three were 51–60, two were over 60, and three did not disclose their age. Five were organizational leaders, three were directors, two were in other roles such as trainers, and the remaining 12 worked directly with youth. Respondents worked in many different youth fields and organization types and represented all regions of the country.

Demographics: Who Is Willing and Able to Stay?

Demographic trends in our small sample of long-term youth-serving professionals offer insight into who is willing and able to sustain a career in the youth fields. The sample is too small to enable us to draw conclusions, and the interviewees rarely drew connections between their various identities and their career decisions. Further insights are likely to emerge in analysis of the full Power of Us Workforce Survey data set.

Still, comparisons between the full set of 62 interviewees (Table A) and the 22 long-term youth

fields professionals in this Perspective (Table 5) may indicate some trends. For example, males represent 23 percent of all interviewees but only about 14 percent of those who have been in the field more than 15 years. This contrast suggests that men may leave the youth fields at a higher rate than women.

Both the full sample and this subset of long-term professionals are predominantly White, but the long-term subset is even more White, at 66 percent, than the full sample, at 53 percent. Black professionals are better represented in the long-term subset (30 percent) than in the full sample (18 percent). People who identified as Latinx or multiracial are not represented at all in this subset, though together these two groups constitute 21 percent of the full sample. Length of time in the field can be only a rough proxy for whether an individual holds a leadership role; however, the gaps in our data are consistent with research that has identified racial leadership gaps in the youth fields and other nonprofit fields (BoardSource, 2017; Lloyd et al., 2021; Russell & Butler, 2020).

Moving up within one large organization

As a child, took swimming lessons at the YMCA

As a teen, lifeguarded and taught swimming at the same YMCA

Majored in education with a plan to teach K–12

Took a "pit stop" job at the YMCA between college and a master's degree

Stayed at the YMCA as an afterschool facilitator

Moved up to director of the afterschool program and then executive director at the YMCA

In regard to levels of education, the subset of long-term professionals roughly tracks to the full sample of interviewees. Most interviewees had a bachelor's degree; about 30 percent of both groups had a master's degree. This finding suggests that satisfying, long-term careers in the youth fields do not require an advanced degree.

Listening to Youth Fields Professionals

In their responses, interviewees identified steps along their diverse career paths, including steps that were common if not universal. These long-term youth-serving professionals also defined external factors, internal motivations, and intentional strategies that helped them sustain careers in fields that many others choose to leave.

Common Steps Along Diverse Paths

Though the paths of the 22 interviewees are unique, some common steps emerged.

An impactful introduction in childhood to the youth fields. Twelve interviewees brought up influential childhood experiences, such as taking swimming lessons at the YMCA, attending an afterschool program at the Boys & Girls Club, visiting their local library regularly, or participating in a 4-H program.

Some postsecondary education. Eighteen interviewees held at least a bachelor's degree, though not necessarily in youth fields. Fields of study included elementary or early childhood education, social work, and communications. Only seven interviewees held a master's degree.

A first job or volunteer experience in a youth field. Interviewees described working in a youth field in high school, in college, or just out of college. Some found the youth fields through practicum placements or early jobs in another field like early childhood education or social work. Four sought out volunteer experiences that then led to careers in the youth fields.

Moving up. Interviewees told varied stories of career advancement. Only five interviewees said they had been promoted within one organization; of those, three worked in large national youth-serving organizations. A larger number of interviewees described having moved through positions in a variety of organizations.

Moving in from another field. Several interviewees achieved sustained careers in the youth fields after moving in from another field. Of the 22 interviewees, five began their careers in K–12 teaching but then chose to engage with youth in different settings. Two had unrelated careers in communications before moving into the youth fields.

What Supports a Sustainable Career

Our 22 veteran interviewees pointed to the same benefits of work in the youth fields as did the larger sample: a desire to make a difference, a love of working with youth, and the joy of seeing young people grow over time. (See Perspectives 3.) They also cited the same challenges, which impel some professionals to leave the youth fields: burnout, lack of opportunity for advancement, and low pay. (See Perspectives 4.) This finding is consistent with past research on the challenges of work in the youth fields (e.g., Bromer et al., 2021; Hall et al., 2020; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006).

Interviewees identified factors that enabled them to sustain long-term careers. They reflected on how opportunities for advancement, moves away from direct service, the impact of race and equity, and the availability of funding shaped their careers in the youth fields.

Opportunities for Advancement

Clearly our veteran interviewees, having spent more than 15 years in the youth fields, have been able to find satisfying job opportunities. They shared their job advancement success stories as well as the challenges of having limited professional opportunities.

Five interviewees described continued career advancement within a single organization. One, who is part of a military family, had moved frequently but was still able to build a career in a national youth-serving organization. They explained:

> I like the path my career took, because I never got bored. I … found a niche where I'm usually the one that goes in and either starts a [program site] from the ground up and opens doors, or it's a [program site] that's not performing well, and so I go in and turn things around and hand it off, because I have to move again…. We were going to move [again], but I got promoted, so we stayed. And then I got promoted again, so we're still here. This is the longest I've stayed in any one spot with [the organization].

When they didn't find opportunities within their organization, interviewees looked elsewhere, taking advantage of their networks to find jobs in other organizations or in different youth fields.

Responding to varied opportunities

Participated in afterschool programs as a child

As a teen, worked as a counselor-in-training for a national youth-serving organization. After college, continued to work at the national organization

Took a school paraprofessional job to explore K–12 teaching

Worked as site director for a different national youth-serving organization, then became director of afterschool

Moved to direct the childcare program in a different branch of the organization

Moved to direct a 21st CCLC program

Intends to go into K–12 if no further advancement is available in OST

One respondent who currently works in workforce development noted, "Every position that I've been promoted into or transitioned into, it's because I knew the person that was there before me or … there was some sort of connection."

An interviewee who has held positions in a variety of afterschool organizations said that, though they have remained nimble, they are concerned about the lack of opportunities:

You know, there are only so many positions at my level … and our district doesn't like how certain things have been done [with this grant program], so they've been discussing, "Is this something we want to do for another 5 years?" That would mean I'm out of a job in 2 years.… It's not just making sure that new staff coming up can come in and stay in the field, but it's even the ones who are already in the field. How are we going to keep them if we can't pay people, if we don't have a position for them? I worry about myself, too, so it's not just a group leaders problem, it's everybody.

This respondent said that their "fallback plan" for "if and when this role becomes less tenable" was to leave the youth fields in favor of K–12 education.
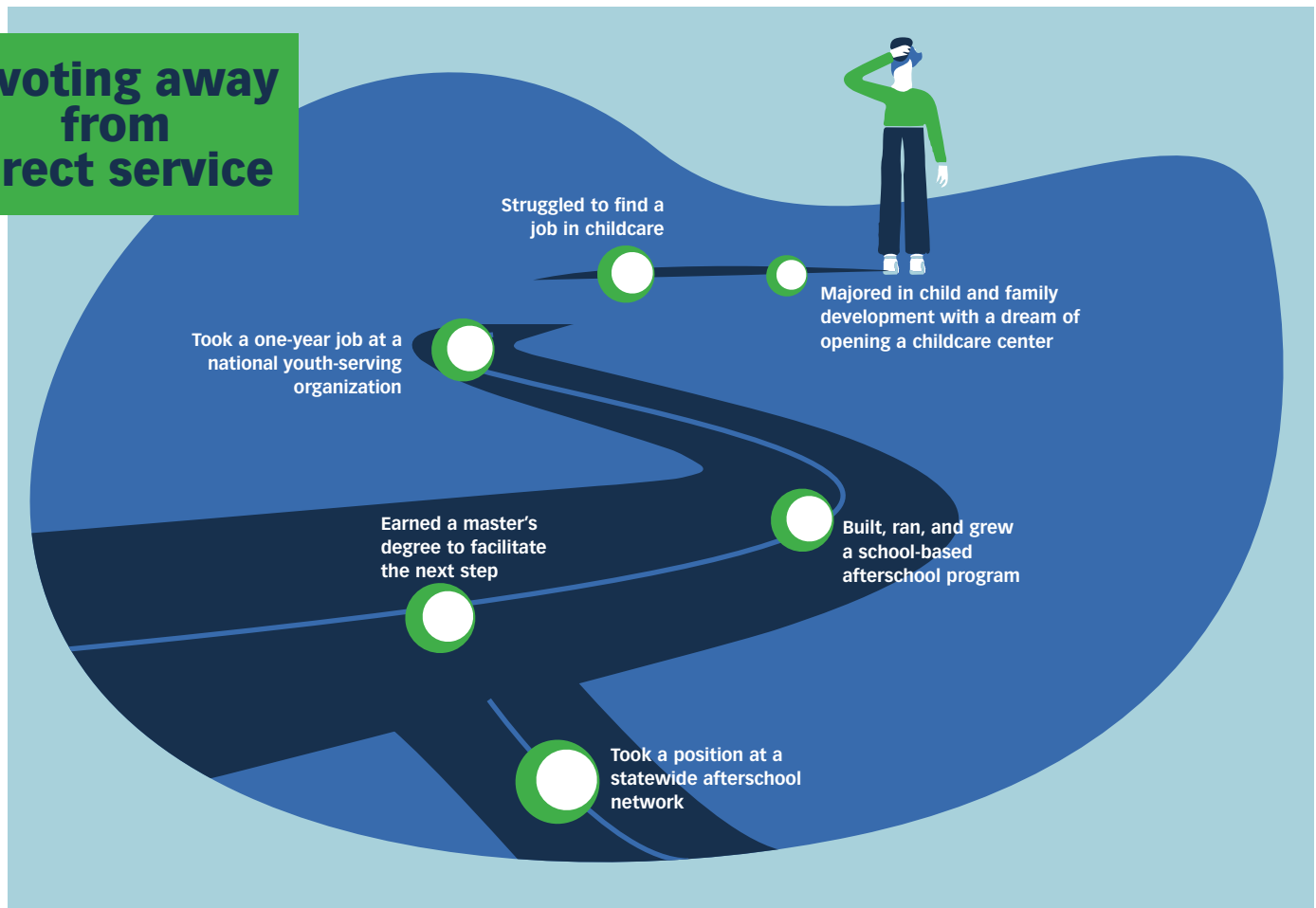
Similarly, an interviewee who has had several positions within another large youth-serving organization does not see remaining there for much longer: "I don't know that there's any advancement."

A Pivot Away from Direct Service

Several interviewees talked about moving away from working directly with youth to what they felt were more sustainable roles in training, administrative leadership, or policy positions. Ten of the 22 experienced youth-serving professionals had moved from work *with* youth to work *on behalf of* youth. Two others said they expected to make such a change in the future.

A pivot from direct service to administration may be seen as a negative reflection of a lack of job advancement that would allow youth fields professionals to continue doing what they love and feel called to do. However, some interviewees described

Pivoting away from direct service

Struggled to find a job in childcare

Majored in child and family development with a dream of opening a childcare center

Took a one-year job at a national youth-serving organization

Earned a master's degree to facilitate the next step

Built, ran, and grew a school-based afterschool program

Took a position at a statewide afterschool network

intentionally seeking out such a pivot in order to avoid burnout. For example, one interviewee shared:

> I honestly had envisioned staying in that position [directing an afterschool program] until I was ready to retire, but COVID wore me down…. I decided to go back to school and complete my master's degree…. When that was done, I was going to have to look for something else. Compassion fatigue was wearing on me, and I did not feel like I had anything else to give.

This person went on to describe getting a new opportunity with a statewide intermediary:

> In the end I enjoy it. I knew that I wanted to make a larger impact, and this allows me to make that larger impact because I can help the entire state and collaborate with other states. It's what I needed to rejuvenate my passion.

Another interviewee, now a director at a local youth-serving organization, explained:

> I knew I would always be, in some way, shape, or form, connected to making sure young people were getting what they needed…. I wanted to be able to do work in this field, and I will say that it is also a hard field. Sometimes, you know, burnout is real. You're taking on life situations for families. And after many years, I did feel that I was more suited for a leadership role, so that I could help make sure that we still had workers in this field for years to come.

Race and Career Advancement

Researchers have pointed out that, although paths to leadership in childcare, afterschool, and other nonprofit sectors are opaque, the challenges and barriers are heightened for emerging leaders of color (Lloyd et al., 2021; Russell & Butler, 2020). We asked all interviewees about diversity and equity issues. Of our long-term interviewees, three spoke specifically about race as it pertains to career advancement in the youth fields.

One African-American woman, who had been promoted within one large national youth-serving organization throughout her career, appreciated how her organization supported emerging leaders of color:

One of the things now they were working on within [the organization] is to see more leadership that look like me, whether male or female, at the higher levels…. We have an African-American professional movement within [the organization]. So those leaders that came before me that have achieved national-level leadership roles, they are now available to us for trainings and webinars and things like that, and we are mentored once we say, "I am interested." So that's the program that I'm interested in, being a future CEO…. They have always paid attention, and they do the best they can to address those issues.

A white youth-serving professional who worked directly with children at a different large national youth-serving organization noted that the staff was racially diverse but that in leadership positions "we are not diverse." They went on to say, "I don't think that's intentional, but it is not diverse."

Another white interviewee reflected on issues of race and privilege as they relate to career advancement:

My husband has always had a good job, and so I've been able to work for less money, and that's a privilege. I'm white, and I'm educated, and I know how to navigate systems, and I know how to negotiate for myself. So I've been able to stay in this field a lot longer than a lot of other people…. I think everybody is talking about diversity, but we also have to pay the wages, where people can afford to go into the profession…. In these helping professions, we have a lot of white women, many of us are married…. There is a certain amount of privilege you had to have … to be able to afford to do the work.

Available Funding

Three interviewees said that funding had shaped their career. For example, a director at a large national youth-serving organization said:

In college, I was going to go into teaching and primary school education, and I just ended up staying with [the youth-serving organization] because that was a time when [the state] had an influx of funds to really develop their afterschool programs. I didn't think I was going to stay, but I am here….

Another interviewee described being recruited by their organization to lead a new grant-funded initiative,

saying that they "fell right into that position." The third, who served in a leadership position at a long-standing national youth-serving organization, described the tenuous nature of grant funding:

I feel like I make a decent amount of money for what I do. It's a grant position. I know our executive director works really hard for grants to make sure that we stay funded. The grant I currently work with comes from the state, and I know everybody's working hard to make sure those funds are there.

Unique Paths, Common Needs

It is not surprising that youth-serving professionals have varied career paths. In order to meet the needs of youth, families, and communities, youth fields professionals by definition must be flexible and adaptable. The nonlinear and diverse career pathways our interviewees described correspond to the nature of the work. In turn, diverse pathways enable practitioners to respond not only to the community's needs but also to their own needs for physical and mental health, professional growth, and family well-being. Furthermore, a field with diverse pathways can nurture a diverse workforce, not only in terms of demographics like race, but also in terms of talents and strengths like dance or visual arts.

Nevertheless, career longevity depends on opportunities for advancement, which are often directly related to the availability of funding. The paths of these interviewees offer insights into the kinds of supports the youth fields need to build: full-time jobs with benefits and livable wages, more opportunities to grow within an organization, and perhaps some paths that include continued direct service with youth and some that do not. Stable funding will also lead to more stable careers. Any strategy for enhancing career pathways must put equity at the center.

There is much work to be done. Nevertheless, the examples of these veteran professionals show that the youth fields offer opportunities for viable long-term careers and highlight what makes persistence in these sometimes difficult fields so rewarding.

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Perspectives 6:
Recommendations from Youth Fields Professionals

Researchers and field leaders have for decades been recommending the same basic strategies to strengthen the youth fields workforce: increase pay and benefits, create clear career pathways, build a credentialing system within a distinct academic discipline, and address racial equity in workforce policies (e.g., Borden et al., 2020; Fusco, 2012; Lloyd et al., 2021; Schlomer et al., 2011; Yohalem et al., 2010).

The drumbeat grows louder as youth fields associations and intermediaries, including the National AfterSchool Association (2022), the Association for Child and Youth Care Practice (2022), and California's Partnership for Children and Youth (n.d.), lead advocacy campaigns on behalf of the youth-serving workforce. At the same time, public support for some youth fields is relatively high, with bipartisan agreement on the importance of out-of-school time programs, high levels of parent satisfaction, and the highest levels of support for public funding to date (Afterschool Alliance, 2018, 2022). The main federal funding stream for afterschool and summer programs has seen nine years of slight increases (Grant, 2022). Meanwhile, the U.S. Department of Education is partnering with national associations in Engage Every Student (2022), a new initiative to expand access to afterschool and summer learning programs.

As the youth fields look to leverage this public support, leaders and policymakers should tune in to the recommendations of the people who are actually doing the work. This Perspective examines what our interviewees said about their priorities for improving the experience of professionals in the youth fields. In addition to pulling out recommendations common to the full sample of interviewees, we specifically explore what is important to the next generation of youth-serving professionals, those who have been in the field for six to ten years.

Methods and Sample

This Perspective is informed by all 62 interviews conducted in 2022–2023. Demographic information for the full sample is in Table A in the introduction, Youth Fields Workforce Perspectives. The recommendations in this Perspective emerged from the base interview protocol of questions asked of all respondents.

See the introductory article Youth Fields Workforce Perspectives for the full Perspectives methodology and a list of research team members.

Listening to Youth Fields Professionals

In general, interviewees echoed the recommendations field leaders and researchers have been making for decades, adding nuance and volume: offer recognition and respect, increase funding, increase compensation, increase the fields' visibility, and make sure youth-serving professionals have the skills they need.

Offer Recognition and Respect

Many interviewees, when asked for recommendations, began with a primary need for recognition and respect for their field. "Raising everyone's respect for the position is the first place to start," said one museum educator who works directly with youth. A common refrain was a desire for the public to understand that work with youth is not babysitting. Twenty-five interviewees recommended making the value of the youth fields clear to parents, school leaders, policymakers, and funders. For example, the director of a local youth-serving organization said:

> Policymakers should know that this is a needed field that needs to be treated as a respected career path…. We're not just here to play with kids, and we're not youth workers just because we couldn't get other jobs. There are lots of us that really, really love this field and are committed to how important it is in the lives of the kids we work with.

The director of a school-based program felt similarly:

The higher-ups have to be able to understand the needs…. After [children] are in school, there's still four hours at the end of the day and two hours at the start of the day where they're going to need somebody to watch them or take care of them, or—for a lot of these kids—just feed them, or make sure they have a place where they can keep track of their homework or have a place where they can be themselves and feel valued for who they are without their parents there.

A Full-Circle Moment

"Anthony," a long-term youth-serving professional, described a full-circle moment when his adult experience mirrored his experience as a child in an afterschool program. "I remember when I was 9 or 10, … there was a counselor [who] showed me how to shoot a basketball. Taught me how to hold it, taught me how to hold my fingers, taught me how to shoot."

Years later, as a young adult, Anthony joined that same afterschool program as an employee. He watched that same counselor teach another child to shoot a basketball. "Seeing that moment and duality of 'I got this experience, she's getting this experience,' was a really profound thing for me," he says. "I show kids how to shoot a basketball the exact same way now."

A leader of a national youth-serving organization said, "Policymakers need to understand that out-of-school time programs are a backbone of the American workforce." Citing the availability of data on youth crime prevention and on student academic and life outcomes, this interviewee argued that "out-of-school time is just as critical as the school day and is a part of an infrastructure that allows our society to … operate successfully."

One faith-based program leader wanted national and local leaders not only to recognize and respect the youth fields, but also to start "talking about the value of out-of-school time." If they did so, said this leader,

"then people will start listening and the narrative will change." A museum educator who works directly with youth shared a similar sentiment about people in power:

We get a lot of really positive feedback and our programs from participants, but also from … government officials who help with funding [and from] parents, teachers, school administrations. I'm realizing that, if this is valuable work, then that's something that needs to be acknowledged by entities outside of ourselves [who have] resources.

Increase Funding

About a third (21) of interviewees emphasized that the youth fields need more funding. For example, a direct-service worker in a housing organization said, "To me, it's coming down to funding. We need more local and federal funding for youth development and after-school."

Some respondents explicitly linked public recognition to funding: If policymakers and the public recognized the importance of the work, they would allocate resources for it. For example, a director at a national youth-serving organization emphasized that out-of-school time programs "have a lot of opportunity to change lives" in up to 20 hours a week of contact with youth. They said that policymakers need to understand the value of the work, "and then I think you fund, fund, fund … and get folks what they need." Similarly, a direct-service worker at a training organization, when asked for recommendations, said, "Value our young people, value the field, value the work—and put the money behind it."

A director at a school-based program argued for increased government funding:

The only way I see for this to change would be with added state and federal support…. I've been giving out the raises to try to keep staff, and … it's not anything we can make work. If we have to increase pay, then we have to increase rates, and if we increase rates, we're not going to have people come, and we need people to come in order to keep staff—and it's just such a catch-22. I just don't see how it can work without outside help.

Some respondents had ideas about how the funding that is available could be made more accessible. For example, a leader of an arts organization expressed frustration at the difficulty of applying for government grants:

There definitely need to be more grants and funding out there. But they don't need to make it as darn

complicated as it is. I mean, when we wrote the [federal agency] grant, … it took hours to try and figure out. I had to call people with the government grant: "How do I do this? What do you do next?" It just was so complicated. I mean, it's like, "Why? Why is it that you want all of this stuff?"

The director of a university-based program was frustrated about the limits funders place on how programs can use their money:

I think something funders should really know is that it's okay to pay for pizza. I get really frustrated with grantors who don't provide any food. Most cultures have food culture. Bringing people together around a meal is probably one of the best ways that we could engage any population, not just youth. My in-laws and I have very different opinions about the world, … but we come together, have dinner, we talk about it. I think that having that meal really breaks down barriers. I know that sounds silly, but, the pizza.

Increase Pay

Beyond increasing funding in general, interviewees expressed a need to increase compensation for staff. Thirteen interviewees saw increased pay as a clear way to address the challenges of recruitment and retention. For example, an interviewee who works for a community-based organization said:

I would love to see more outpouring of grants and educational resources in these areas, so that we can ensure we're attracting really high-quality talent, and also compensating the educators and the leaders for their appropriate skills. Because … highly qualified, amazing educators and leaders … are making one-third or one-fourth of what somebody with a similar skill set for a similar position in a company would be making. So more money for people, leadership development programs that really focus on exceptional talent, and putting those into places that the communities need it most.

Organizational leaders were sensitive to the need for better pay for employees at lower levels. The leader of a national youth-serving organization put it bluntly: "We have to pay them…. Most of our conversation as leadership is, What are we going to do to keep the people that we have, especially the ones that are good?" The leader of a housing organization agreed:

The priority should be for workforce development, if pay is included in that…. If we can't pay an equitable wage, there are going to continue to be issues, and people deserve to be able to work in our field and make a livable wage.

A direct-service worker at a national youth-serving organization connected pay and recruitment:

I think if people are borderline on what they want to do, and they're interested in working with kids, honestly, it probably does come down to money, because it's got to be worth it for them…. Because, unfortunately, if they can't pay their bills, they're not going to do it.

The director of a university-based program emphasized the importance of total compensation, including but not limited to salary:

The first thing you need to do is to invest in your people. If you invest in your people, your people will stay, and then you'll see all of the benefits. Instead of having to create seventeen new programs, you can work on the program that you have and make it really strong, where people feel like they're valued. And so, the one thing is: Put more money in your people. Give them more vacation time, and give them opportunities to grow within the organization. Give them a seat at the table. But at the end of the day money talks.

Increase the Visibility of Youth Work as a Career

Fourteen interviewees expressed a desire to enable more people to recognize the youth fields as a career. Several noted that reaching this goal will take concerted effort. A direct-service worker at a school-based organization noted the need not only for wages but also for "training so people feel empowered." "Sometimes," this interviewee went on to say, "it might just be a matter of [potential employees] not knowing that there are ways of growing in this field." The respondent saw compensation, training, and advancement opportunities as ways not only to recruit new employees but also to retain current youth fields professionals. An interviewee from a statewide afterschool network suggested intentional strategies to introduce people to the youth fields, including work-study programs.

Diverse representation in the workforce could have a significant impact on recruitment, particularly

in sectors that have historically been predominantly White. One outdoor educator noted:

> We need people to see themselves in this career, and that it's not something that is just for … middle-class white people to do…. The ability to have more people look like who our audiences are would be great. How to make our spaces more welcoming so that more diverse communities feel welcome in these spaces.

Prepare Youth-Serving Professionals

Asked about the kinds of preparation the workforce needs, interviewees spoke about formal preparation programs and about the skills and dispositions people need to be successful in the youth fields.

Formal Education and Credentialing

Interviewees who spoke about formal preparation including credentials and degrees had mixed views. Nineteen expressed unequivocal support. For example, a director of a faith-based program pointed to the benefits to employers:

> [A credential] would fit in for me as an employer as something that would help me vet the potential candidates to join my team. Because I would feel confident that this particular individual, A, at least has the information to be a good direct-care service provider, B, probably shows some initiative to do it, and that's the type of teammate I want, and, C, demonstrates that they have a passion for learning, and so I could build off of that.

Another reason for supporting a youth fields workforce credential was voiced by a direct-service worker, who said that a credential would "help as far as lending legitimacy and credibility to the type of work that we do."

Four interviewees expressed wariness about requiring credentials or degrees, pointing out limitations and barriers. For example, one program director said:

> Neither of [my staff] have college degrees, and they're great at it. Their heart is in it, and they care about the kids, and I don't feel like credentialing or more education would make them better at the things that make them good at it. I think some very focused professional development about specific issues to our program would be wonderful. So I'm not saying we don't have anything to learn, but I think it would be hard for a credentialing program to fit the needs of our particular program.

A Broad Concept of Career Growth

"Javier" has built a youth-serving career starting with several direct-service positions, followed by work with his state afterschool network, and then moving back into direct service with a different organization.

Today, as a supervisor, he advocates for career growth that doesn't rely on advancement within one organization. "It's okay to jump around organizations," he says. He tells staff who are "ready to move on" that "it's okay that you're leaving us." He thinks it is "better for the field as a whole" because "we don't want to lose them in the field."

Looking at the field holistically affects Javier's perspective on professional development and staff support. He sees his job as "figuring out how to create more opportunities for people to grow and develop into what they hope to do." Ultimately, what matters to him is building and growing the field as well as the individuals working in it. He is committed to "helping my peers and my colleagues realize their own potential within their programs."

An outdoor educator elaborated:

> I certainly think there are things that you could learn in a structured classroom setting that would be helpful, but it often feels to me that, like, being good with people or learning to work with youth is really about on-the-job part of the training. It's hard to train for in a classroom…. I mean, we can teach people outdoor skills. It's hard to teach people empathy, and to be kind, and those sorts of things.

Seventeen respondents had mixed feelings; they saw some merit in credentials and degrees but added caveats. For instance, one direct-service worker at a faith-based organization acknowledged potential benefits but shared concerns about access: "Will this credentialing be accessible to people?" This respondent pointed out that, "if it costs a lot, or it takes a lot of time," a credential would not be accessible to people in the youth fields, who typically are short on both money and time. However, the interviewee went on to say:

Credentials, whether we like it or not, actually matter in society. So I think there is potential for it to … validate the work…. It's also interesting to think about, because credentials usually equal pay…. If you have a credential, you should be getting paid more, so I could see it. I think it would validate the field…. If it's accessible in terms of the amount of time it takes and how much it costs, I think it could actually be really important, just getting everyone on the same page of certain knowledge that is essential to working with young people. Obviously it looks better on a résumé. Hopefully, it would lead to more pay and would be an upward mobility thing.

A director of a school-based program shared similar sentiments about the need to support any credentialing system:

I think [credentials] could be valuable if they were standardized…. It needs to be something that is expected, that an organization will support you by paying for you to go to trainings or by giving you time to have observation hours, giving you the ability to access these resources in order to get this certification…. So, if they are going to move toward certification and needing qualifications, then they need to make sure they are, A, standardized across the field and, B, that employees have consistent, reliable, supported access to them.

Needed Skills and Dispositions

In response to the open-ended question, "What do people need to know or be able to do to do this work?" interviewees cited the factors listed in Table 6 on the next page. Some are learned skills; many are dispositions or attitudes that may be harder to teach.

A few interviewees mentioned other skills and dispositions including communication skills, knowledge of child development, curiosity or a desire to learn, teamwork, knowledge of funding and regulations, mental health, and an understanding of the communities in which one works.

The list generated by our interviewees overlaps with established core competency frameworks. For example, the National AfterSchool Association's Core Knowledge, Skills, and Competencies for Afterschool and Youth Development Professionals (2021) lists dispositions including flexibility and delight in how children and youth learn and grow, as well as skills in content areas including relationship-building and

child and youth development. The competency list of the Association for Child and Youth Care Practice and the Child and Youth Care Certification Board (Mattingly et al., 2010) also centers relationships, mentions flexibility, and incorporates social and emotional skills.

Eight interviewees cited classroom management as a crucial skill for the workforce, but twice as many (16) highlighted classroom management when asked about areas in which more professional development is needed. This finding suggests that behavior management is a needed skill that employees haven't necessarily mastered before entering the field. Several interviewees told stories of colleagues who left the youth fields because they felt overwhelmed by challenging behaviors.

Listening to the Next Generation of Youth-Serving Professionals

Strengthening the workforce means retaining people who have already proven to have a passion for the work while enabling those professionals to further develop their already strong skills. People who have been in the youth fields more than five but less than 10 years are at a pivotal point in their career, when they typically either choose to stay in the youth fields or change careers in order to grow. To take the pulse of such youth fields professionals, we focused on the recommendations of the 21 interviewees in this six-to-10-year cohort. In general, these respondents echo the sentiments of the larger group of participants. However, two issues stood out as of particular importance to this "next generation" of youth-serving professionals: limited opportunities for advancement and diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Limited Opportunities for Advancement

In 2020, the National Afterschool Association found that, despite efforts to professionalize the field of out-of-school time, there had been no concerted effort to create a leadership pipeline or clear career path (Russell & Butler, 2020). Of our 18 respondents who spoke about limited opportunities for growth in their organization, eight, or about 45 percent, were next-generation leaders. One museum educator said that "even having worked for years in this field and having a lot of great experience doesn't necessarily guarantee you" an opportunity for promotion.

Three next-generation participants said that the only path to advancement would remove them from

Table 6. Responses About What People Need to Know or Be Able to Do to Work in the Youth Fields

Skill or Disposition	Number of Interviewees	Respondent Quotes
Patience	12	Oh, patience for sure…. The burnout rate is just so high because people are getting frustrated and can't work with these "high effort" kids. To be able to have the patience to work with children of different ages, and knowing and understanding what is to be expected.
Flexibility	12	You have to be pretty flexible because … your title might be this, but you're going to have to do this, too, and that's just one of those things that you learn as it goes on. Adaptability…. Working with kids, anything can happen. You need to just be able to switch plans and do what needs to be done to make sure kids are safe and … that they're learning and having fun.
Relationship-building skills	11	The ability to connect and care is so crucial…. It's more than just a job…. Whether or not … you can … be intentional about your interactions to make sure you are able to provide them a strong and consistent role model is vital to working in childcare. Relationship building is … definitely number one.
Social and emotional skills	9	All of the SEL skills! We look for things, like, people [have] got to be self-aware…. It's hard to work with kids, so they've got to be able to self-manage their own emotions. You have to have a lot of empathy.
Experience with youth	9	You have to have a lot of knowledge about working with youth and youth development. You have to have experience working with teens, for sure. But it's that real-world experience of being in a classroom that gets you what you need to be able to thrive with [young people].
Love for the kids	9	You have to love the kids. If you don't have a love for the kids, then nothing else matters. And I think if you have that, the other skills are easier to develop. The most important skills for staff to have to carry out that work is first, desire and intent to work with young people and build relationships.
Classroom management skills	8	Honestly, I think classroom management is the biggest thing…. Several people … have come into our job, and they don't last because they don't know how to handle the classroom. The organization that I started my out-of-school education journey with didn't really prepare us well for classroom or behavior management…. So they were relying solely on our content knowledge…. But once I got in there, I realized there is just so much more to really being an effective mentor and educator for students, especially in an underserved community.

direct-service work with youth, which is what drew them into the work in the first place and continues to fuel their passion. A direct-service worker with a national youth-serving organization noted that their organization had only two positions above their own: program director and executive director. "As much as I love this organization and … the work, I don't think that those positions are where I see myself."

Focus on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

In a 2022 article, the Boys & Girls Clubs of America highlighted the benefits of a diverse workplace, stating that practicing DEI principles enables staff to feel heard, safe, and happy, thereby encouraging them to "go the extra mile." Our 21 next-generation youth fields professionals emphasized DEI more than other groups. Of the 23 participants who discussed the need for more professional development in DEI, just over half (12) were next-generation professionals; they emphasized a need for training in DEI, disability inclusion, and trauma-informed practices. Five indicated that both direct-service workers and leaders need professional development. For example, a direct-service worker in a national youth-serving organization stated:

> I think it is important for anybody working in the youth field to have the same training as the people working directly with the kids…. So, if you are even the president of your area, you should also be doing those trainings.

Additionally, four next-generation youth-serving professionals advocated for increased equity in hiring. They pointed to practices such as requiring skills appropriate to the work as opposed to requiring degrees and providing training pathways for young people to enter the workforce. Of the 16 participants in the full sample who noted the need to diversify staff and leadership, six, or more than one-third, were next-generation leaders. This group focused on equitable practices in pay and hiring and recognized the importance of a workforce that reflects the communities and youth being served. A representative from a local youth-serving organization shared:

> I think we need more diverse educators. How can we get more Black and brown folks into the classroom to teach and role model for students? … I would love to see more policymakers that are of color or come from diverse backgrounds, especially those that are at the board level, the decision-maker level. Because right now I feel like a lot of our decision-makers are not reflective of our communities. I'd really like to see a lot of changes in those areas at a systemic level.

Lifting Up Recommendations from the Field

The youth-serving professionals in our sample expressed a strong need for the public to recognize and respect their work. The other priorities they raised flow from this basic need. Recognition and respect should bring increased funding that can be put toward staff compensation, thus creating sustainable careers. Furthermore, helping people see the youth fields as a viable career should make it easier to recruit and retain talented and committed professionals. Then youth fields leaders can focus on making sure that youth-serving professionals have the skills they need to help youth thrive—the skills the professionals themselves have identified as vital to their work.

In particular, policymakers and field leaders should listen to the next generation of youth-serving professionals. Our subsample of professionals with six to 10 years in the youth fields say they need opportunities for career advancement if they are to stay. These professionals, having experienced some growth in their careers, are at an age when they might be thinking about buying homes, starting families, or growing professionally. Providing clear opportunities for advancement—perhaps including opportunities for promotion and increased pay while staying in direct service—can help to keep these professionals in the youth fields. Our next-generation professionals also raised DEI as an issue that especially matters to them. They suggested promoting systemic and local efforts to recruit and retain youth-serving professionals of color in order both to strengthen programs' ability to serve their communities and to support the workforce.

We interviewed only 62 youth fields professionals—but their voices overlap in ways that send clear messages about how to strengthen and support the workforce. This chorus is in tune with the recommendations that have been coming from field leaders for decades. Adding the recommendations of professionals who are actually doing the work clarifies and emphasizes what needs to be done. More data from the field, including the Power of Us Workforce Survey, will help to fine-tune these priorities and suggest further avenues for action. We are grateful for the youth-serving professionals who have given their time, experience, and wisdom to inform the future direction of the youth fields.

This reflection from a youth-serving professional helps put our research into perspective:

> I think that youth work is pretty big, that there's a lot of people who work in this field. And I think a lot of it is undercounted, especially when it's stuff that's done by volunteers. But it's really not undercounted by the young people or the families who participate. Whether it's an afterschool program, or a resource available through their school, or summer programming through the park district, it's not frivolous. It's part of the healthcare system, because it's providing a lot of social-emotional care. It's part of childcare—it's often supporting parents' ability to work, which I know government people often care about…. The young people and families who participate in it certainly don't underappreciate it, in my experience.

Propelled by the recommendations of youth-serving professionals, the youth fields can move forward with a louder and more unified voice, prioritizing the needs of those who do this work daily.

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