



RESEARCH REPORT

Young Parents Making Their Way

Combining Education and Work while Parenting

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Executive Summary

In 2013, as many as 4.6 million Americans were young parents, defined as ages 18 to 24 (Sick, Spaulding, and Park 2018). And approximately 43 percent of children in the United States are born to parents who had their first child when they were young (Sandstrom et al. 2019). Many of these young parents work and participate in school or training to advance their career prospects and improve their family's economic security. Managing those responsibilities is challenging, and parents may need support to succeed. The goal of this report is to provide information about the patterns of work and education young parents engage in from the birth of their first child until they are approximately 30 years old. We also see how those activities are associated with later outcomes, such as early adulthood earnings.

To examine these issues, we present analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97). We identify NLSY97 respondents who were young parents—defined in the survey as people who had their first child between the ages of 16 and 24. We investigate their characteristics at the time they became parents and use the literature background to identify five key groups of interest: teen parents (ages 16 to 19), parents whose household income was under 200 percent of the federal poverty level, female parents, black parents, and Latinx parents. We examine their demographic characteristics, education background and status, and income at the time when they had their first child.

Our analysis follows these parents through age 30. We examine the types of education they engage in, trends in income, and interruptions to school and employment caused by child-related needs. We also create a work and education calendar in which we categorize each month from the birth of their first child through age 30 as a month in which the parents are only working, only in education, combining work and education, or in neither work nor education. In doing so, we show the breakdown of how much young parents engaged in work and education beyond age 24.

Finally, we conduct an analysis of how both initial characteristics and patterns of work and education are associated with outcomes at age 30, namely family and individual income. We find that a higher cumulative share of time spent combining work and education is associated with positive increases in earnings at age 30. Time spent only working is also associated with positive earnings increases, but time spent in neither work nor education (being “disconnected”) is associated with significant earnings decreases.¹ Time spent only in education is also associated with earnings decreases. These results are similar across all the groups we analyzed. Furthermore, the initial characteristics of

young parents (such as their demographic group or their education status when they had their child) affect earnings at age 30. Economic disparities observed at the time of their child's birth persist or become greater over time.

We suggest that supports that help young parents balance work and education are important, as are those that enable parents not engaged in those activities to engage in them. Targeting parents while they are young is important, as is supporting parents who are also steadily engaged in the combination of work and education from ages 25 to 30.

Young Parents in Work and Education

Young adulthood can be a difficult time. On top of preparing for their own economic future, people who have children when they are young face the added challenges of raising a child. Little is known about how young parents progress through work and education from the time they have their child through later life.

The purpose of this study is to better understand young parents' work and education activities and how they link to later life outcomes. The longitudinal nature of the data allows us to provide a detailed view of young parents' work and education patterns from the time of their first child's birth through age 30 and make these connections to outcomes at age 30. The study focuses on differences in these trajectories for five key groups of young parents.

Existing literature examines the characteristics of young parents, including specific groups such as teen parents (Eyster, Callan, and Adams 2014; Sick, Spaulding, and Park 2018; Spaulding, Derrick-Mills, and Callan 2016). Other research addresses the programs and available supports for young parents (Dodkowitz, Park, and Spaulding 2018) or the strategies service providers can use to help young parents (CFRP 2019). This study adds to that literature by examining young parents' work and education participation into early adulthood as well as time spent not working or in education. We show that these are associated with life outcomes at age 30, such as individual and family income. Moreover, we examine the share of time young parents spend balancing work and education at different ages and the types of education young parents pursue. We also report noteworthy differences across key subgroups of young parents.

A complementary report (Sandstrom et al. 2019) focuses on the families of young parents who are combining work and education and uses the child as the unit of analysis. That study examines the characteristics of young parents as well as parents' and children's schedules the week before the survey, looking at the amount of time children spend in different care arrangements. Both reports seek to better understand the lives of young parents balancing work and education but use different perspectives to do so.

Our analysis is divided into five sections: background, methods, the characteristics of young parents, the work and education trajectories of young parents as they reach adulthood, and young parent life outcomes at age 30.

Background

To provide context for our analysis of young parents' education and work experiences, this section briefly summarizes the literature on how having a child at a young age can affect a person's education and workforce participation and what supports can help them.

Having A Child at a Young Age Can Interrupt Education and Training, Possibly Leading to Disadvantages That Outlast Youth

Having a child as a teenager or in one's early twenties can interrupt the pursuit of education and training and increase the chances of dropping out (Hess et al. 2014; Johnson et al. 2009). Among parents ages 18 to 24 in 2013, only 16 percent were enrolled in college (Sick, Spaulding, and Park 2018). As recently as 2016, student parents of any age accounted for 22 percent of all undergraduates (GAO 2019). Early experiences in education and employment can affect parents and nonparents alike in long-lasting ways. Youth who reach their mid-twenties without having had a stable job may be at greater risk of permanently lower earnings or increased periods of unemployment (Rockefeller Foundation 2014). Furthermore, disconnected youth are at risk of a host of negative outcomes, including lower education, lower earnings, and health problems (Lewis and Gluskin 2018).

Early childhood development sets the foundation for later learning and academic success as well as social competence (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000). Children born to young parents, especially to teens, are more likely to grow up in a single-parent household and experience poverty (Livingston 2018). Many young fathers lacked their own father while growing up and subsequently need help learning what fatherhood entails for them (CFRP 2019). Parents' educational attainment is a significant predictor of economic mobility for their children (Mosle and Patel 2012). Teen parents' education may be interrupted even earlier than young adult parents', and their children may face poorer health outcomes and higher rates of their own teen pregnancy (Berzin and DeMarco 2010). More than half of mothers who never finished high school are teens, and more than half of teenage mothers are low-income (Mollborn and Dennis 2012). When young parents struggle, the effects can be intergenerational.

Societal inequality also begins to leave its mark on young people in their earliest experiences in the workforce. White youth ages 16 to 24 are employed at significantly higher rates than young people of other races and ethnicities, and both black and Latinx youth have higher rates of disconnection (Spievack and Sick 2019). These disparities persist in adulthood, with black fathers experiencing a severe lack of economic mobility (Chetty et al. 2018). In 2013, female youth ages 20 to 24 earned about \$1.50 an hour less than their male counterparts—a wage gap that persists even within industries (Spievack and Sick 2019). Young parents face these early inequalities while caring for a child and potentially catching up on their schooling or work experience.

Many Young Parents Work While in School

Having a child to provide for may motivate many young parents to pursue the economic payoff of higher education. In an increasingly competitive labor market, postsecondary degrees or industry-recognized credentials are still a worthwhile investment of money and time. Up to two-thirds of jobs will require a postsecondary credential or require at least some education or training beyond high school (Carnevale, Cheah, and Hanson 2015; Carnevale et al. 2018). Having a bachelor's degree confers median earnings of approximately \$400 more a week than the earnings of workers with some college or less (Loprest and Nightingale 2018). Bachelor's degrees are still the clearest pathway to a family-sustaining wage, and in 2016 more than half (56 percent) of "good jobs" went to people who had them (Carnevale et al. 2018). And college experience that falls short of obtaining a degree may still confer significant economic benefit (Giani, Attewell, and Walling 2019). These factors increase the incentive to return to school even given the cost and potential challenges.

Many young parents may opt to pursue education and job training well beyond age 24. Data from 2010 to 2011 show that 81 percent of low-income parents enrolled in education were older than age 24 (Spaulding, Derrick-Mills, and Callan 2016), and most of those young parents were enrolled in college. In 2013, about two-fifths of young parents were pursuing associate's degrees, and two-fifths were pursuing bachelor's degrees (Sick, Spaulding, and Park 2018). Of young parents pursuing education, 73 percent were also working full time, compared with 53 percent of parents older than age 24. Furthermore, student parents also take on an average of \$13,504 in student debt, with black parents taking on the most of any race at \$18,113 (Institute for Women's Policy Research 2019).

Young Parents Can Potentially "Catch Up" in Education and Training.

Although having a child at a young age can create challenges to participating in education and training, parents whose education was interrupted might be able to "catch up" to obtain degrees and credentials. Young parents are more likely to have delayed college entry and to take longer to earn degrees, but many eventually do (Aspen Institute 2012). They also account for up to about one-quarter of all college students (Aspen Institute 2012). Unmarried parents are much more likely on average to enroll in shorter-term vocational trainings (Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen 2010), suggesting a desire for a more direct pathway to employment. More than other young people, young parents can benefit from supports to help sustain them while they pay for their education, balance complex schedules, and work to provide for their family.

Methods

Our analysis uses data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97). The NLSY97 is a nationally representative survey of 8,984 people who were 12 to 17 years old in 1997. From that year on, these people were interviewed once a year through 2012, at which point they were interviewed every other year. The interviews cover a wide variety of topics and allow for a detailed picture of the respondents' lives from their teen years through early adulthood. Initial parent characteristics or conditions are taken from when they had their first child. Parents' outcomes are measured at age 30.

Our sample consists of 3,319 NLSY97 respondents who had their first child between ages 16 and 24. We refer to this group as “young parents,” though we track them through age 30. This age range is slightly larger than from previous similar work (Sick, Spaulding, and Park 2018), and it aligns with the definition used by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.² People who had a child before age 16 or after age 24 are excluded from the analysis.³ We use weights in our analysis to make results nationally representative.⁴ Our sample represents 6.6 million young parents.

We use data from interviews or panels from 1997 to 2015. Each panel provides information on parents over their approximate age at the time of that panel, from the age they had their child to age 30.⁵ Because the NLSY97 skipped interviews in 2012 and 2014, age-30 data are not available for all parents. In those cases, we used data from the panel in which the parent was 29 years old. Our analytic sample encompasses a minimum of 7 years and a maximum of 13 years for each parent, depending on the parent's age when having his or her first child and when first interviewed.⁶

Throughout this analysis, we present data for all young parents for context. However, we focus on data across key groups that we chose based on research that suggests they are at a societal disadvantage and may benefit most from targeted support. The groups are as follows:

- **Young parents with low incomes:** Parents whose household or family income was 200 percent or less of the federal poverty level when they had their oldest child.⁷
- **Teen parents:** Parents who were ages 16 to 19 when they had their oldest child.
- **Young black parents:** Parents who identified as black. In the NLSY97 variable that was used, this group is mutually exclusive with parents who are of Hispanic or Latino origin, white, or another race.⁸
- **Young Latinx parents:** Parents who identified as being of Hispanic or Latino origin, referred to here as Latinx. In the NLSY97 variable that was used, this group is mutually exclusive with parents who are black, white, or another race.
- **Young female parents**

In our analysis, each subgroup is presented as a binary indicator, and we make a statistical comparison to those not in the subgroup. For example, black parents are compared against all parents not identifying as black (including parents identifying as white, Latinx, and other races). The only two subgroups that are mutually exclusive are the categories of black and Latinx.⁹

Many complex patterns of work and education were possible over the years. For each month from the birth of their child to age 30, we categorized the parent as only working, only in education, combining work and education, or in neither work nor education.¹⁰ To simplify reporting, we express parents' amount of time in these four statuses as fractions. We take the number of months in each of the four statuses and divide by the total number of months (from their first child through age 30) in which the parent's work and education statuses are known.¹¹

We do not categorize the custodial status of young parents or use relationship status as a key analysis subgroup. A parent's involvement in their child's life may be varied and complicated, and the well-being of a noncustodial parent may have a significant impact on his or her child's life. Research suggests that approximately 20 percent of parents ages 18 to 24 were noncustodial in 2013, many of them men (Sick, Spaulding, and Park 2018).

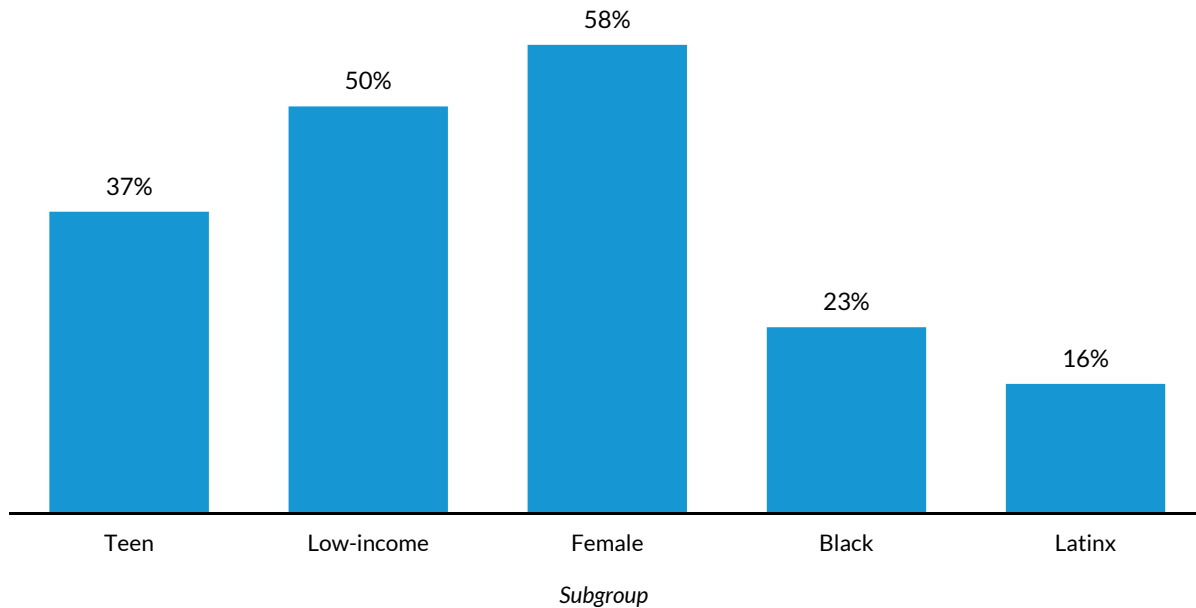
Characteristics of Young Parents

Our sample represents approximately 6.6 million young parents. In this section, we describe their characteristics in the year when they had their first child and how these differ across key groups.

A young parent's life circumstances when they have a child can have a crucial effect on the next decade of their life. Being a teenager, having a low income, or being from a racial or ethnic minority group can put them at a disadvantage in providing for their child or affording child care. Figure 1 shows the share of all young parents who were in these key subgroups at the time of their child's birth. Over one-third of young parents (37 percent) were between ages 16 to 19 when they had their first child. Half of all young parents had a household or family income under 200 percent of the federal poverty level when they had their child, which we define as low income.¹² A majority of young parents were female (57 percent), one-fourth (23 percent) were black, and 16 percent were Latinx. These demographic characteristics reflect the NLSY sample of youth drawn in 1997 and not the demographic breakdown of the youth population today, which includes a larger share of Latinx youth.¹³

FIGURE 1

Percentage of Young Parents in Key Subgroups at the Birth of Their First Child



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Notes: N = 3,319. Percentages are out of nonmissing responses for each question.

Young parents’ education status when they had their first child is also important, because it may be more challenging to progress in education and “catch up” after having a child. Table 1 shows that one in five young parents dropped out of high school; that is, they were not enrolled in education when they had their first child and they had completed fewer than 12 grades. Another 12 percent were in high school.

TABLE 1

Percentage of Young Parents in High School and College When They Had Their First Child, by Key Subgroup

Subgroup	High school dropout	In high school	High school graduate	In college, no degree	Some college, no degree	Completed college or obtained degree
All	20	12	30	11	19	8
Teen	29	32	27	9	4	0
Low income	27	13	31	11	14	5
Female	16	14	29	13	19	9
Black	19	18	28	14	15	6
Latinx	19	15	31	10	19	4

Notes: N = 3,074. Categories are mutually exclusive and row percentages add to 100. Degrees or certificates include associate’s, bachelor’s, master’s, professional, and doctoral degrees.

Almost one-third of parents had completed high school but had not attended any college. Eleven percent of young parents were in college when they had their first child, 19 percent were not in school and had no degree but had completed some college, and only 8 percent had completed college or obtained a postsecondary degree of any kind. Obtaining a degree, or even just attending college without obtaining a degree, increases the likelihood of earning a family-sustaining wage (Carnevale et al. 2018; Giani, Attewell, and Walling 2019).

Unsurprisingly, teen parents were the subgroup with the highest share still in high school at the birth of their child (32 percent), but they also had the highest share of high school dropout (29 percent), possibly because of pregnancy. A large share of low-income parents also dropped out of high school (27 percent), and only 29 percent had any college experience. In addition to academic education, one-fifth (20 percent) of all young parents had completed some type of vocational or occupational training at the birth of their first child. The most common nonacademic credential was a certificate of completion, which 14 percent of young parents had obtained at the birth of their child. Those were followed by vocational licenses or certifications (6 percent) and other types of nonacademic credentials (2 percent).¹⁴ These nonacademic credentials vary greatly in their time required to complete and meaningfulness in the labor market, but they all represent efforts by young parents to improve their work-related skills. Several other characteristics of young parents at the time of their first child's birth can affect their economic well-being. Being a single parent can be especially difficult, and 58 percent of young parents were single (not married or cohabiting) when they had their first child. Receipt of public benefits also signals having economic needs. Young parents were receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits at a rate of 16 percent, which was about double that of the general population in 1997. Five percent were receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or cash assistance, which equaled the national average in 1997 (US Bureau of the Census 1998b).

Young Parents Often Had More Than One Potential Barrier or Disadvantage

Young parents who are disadvantaged often do not face just one barrier. Table 2 shows the share of young parents who fall into multiple demographic groups. Teen parents were likely (66 percent) to be in a low-income household when they had their child, which aligns with other research (Mollborn and Dennis 2012). All groups had an above-average share of teen parents. More than one-half (53 percent) of female parents were low income, and almost two-thirds (62 percent) of black parents were low income, a 7 percentage-point increase over Latinx parents (55 percent).

TABLE 2

Percentages of Young Parents in Intersections of Key Subgroups

Key Subgroup	Teen	Low income	Female	Black	Latinx
Teen	100	66	65	26	18
Low income	44	100	61	27	16
Female	42	53	100	22	15
Black	42	62	54	100	NA
Latinx	42	55	54	NA	100

Notes: NA = not applicable (categories are mutually exclusive). N = 3,319. Percentages are out of nonmissing responses.

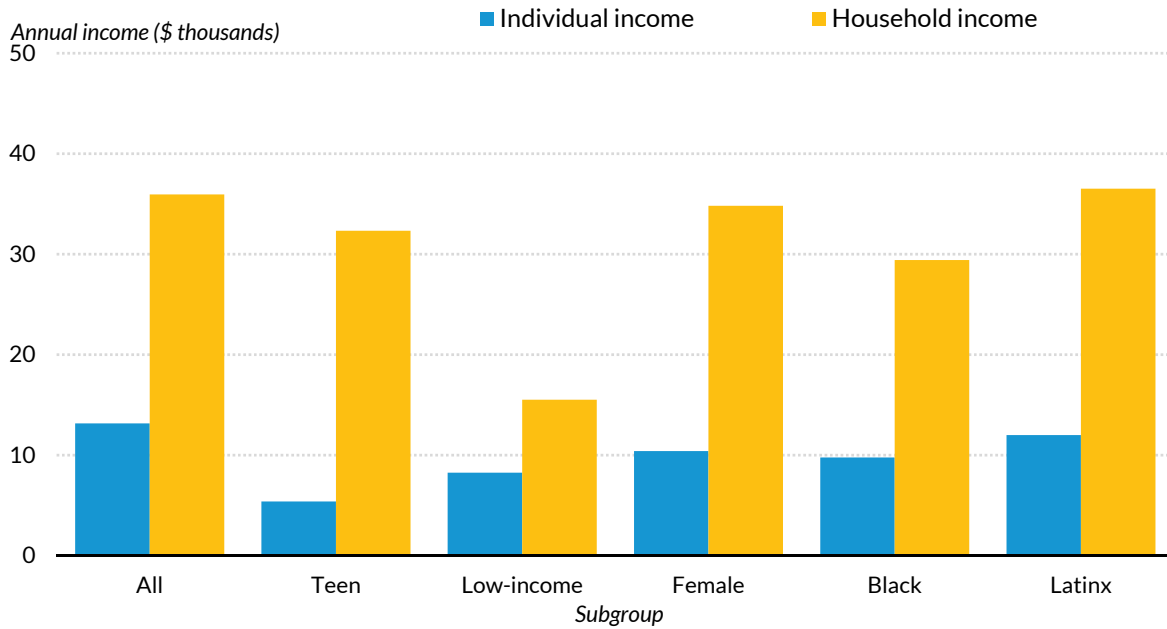
Black, Female, and Teen Parents Earned Less Than Other Young Parents When They Had Their First Child

Young parents come from a variety of households with different incomes. Some may be living on their own; others may be living with partners or family members. Teen parents may be less likely to be supporting themselves or to have their own income. Figure 2 shows average individual and household income (which includes individual income) for all young parents and each demographic group in the year they had their first child.¹⁵ Across all young parents, individual income (\$13,000) was about one-third of household income (\$36,000). Although low-income parents by definition had low average annual household income (\$16,000), black parents (\$29,000) and teen parents (\$32,000)¹⁶ were also in economically disadvantaged households relative to all young parents. Black parents’ households earned around \$7,000 less a year than the average for all young parents.¹⁷

All demographic groups earned individual incomes below the overall average, with teen parents (who were often in or dropped out of high school, as discussed previously) earning only \$5,000. Low-income parents earned \$8,000, while black and female parents earned about \$10,000 a year. Young parents’ incomes generally accounted for 30 to 40 percent of their household’s total earnings, except for low-income and teen parents. Teen parents’ earnings only accounted for 17 percent of their household income because they were often in high school or too young to work. Low-income parents accounted for 53 percent of their household incomes, given they may have lived in households with fewer employed individuals. Teens may have relied primarily on their (often low-income) families for support, while low-income parents might often have had less household support.

FIGURE 2

Annual Income of Young Parents and Their Households in the Year When They Had Their First Child, by Subgroup



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Notes: *N* ranges from 1,307 to 2,462. Means are calculated out of those with reported earnings. The NLSY97 asked for household income in rounds 1 through 7, at which time the survey began asking for family income (round 8 and above). Only household data from rounds 1 through 7 are shown here.

Work and Education Trajectories of Young Parents as They Reach Adulthood

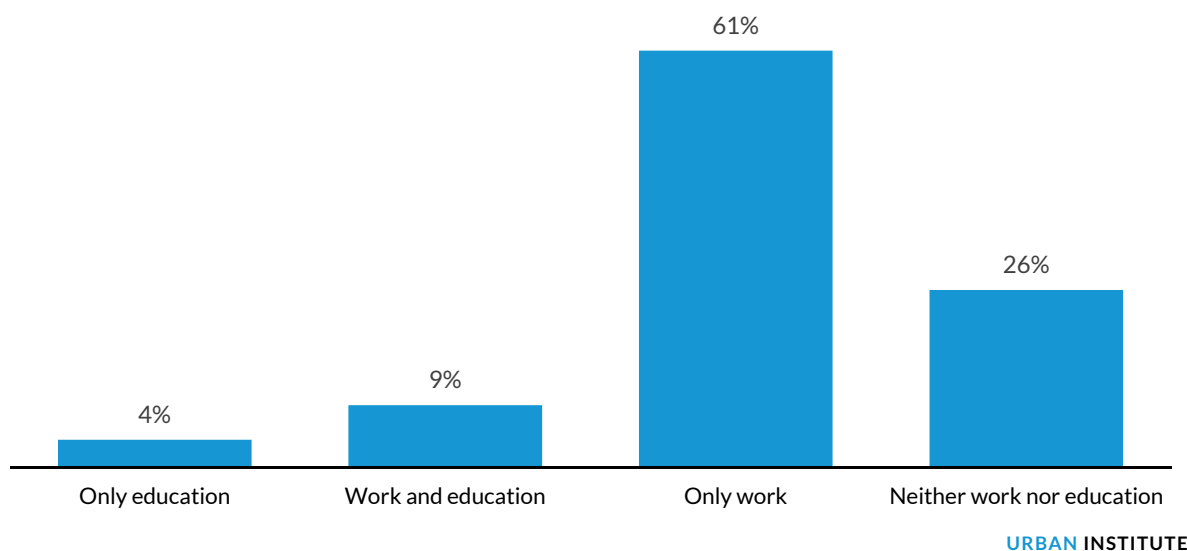
In this section, we describe the trends over time of income, participation in work and education (including nonacademic vocational training), and interruptions to both. We show that although education participation drops off as young parents age, many continue to pursue additional learning throughout their twenties, and they often work simultaneously.

Young Parents Spend Most of Their Time from the Birth of Their First Child to Age 30 Either Working, in School, or Both

Most young parents, 61 percent, have combined work and education in the same month at some point between the birth of their first child and age 30. We examine how much time each month young parents participated in work and education from when they had their first child through age 30. We divide total

months in each activity by the total months across all years when the parents' work and education status was not missing. This provides a share of time that parents spent in only in education, only working, combining work and education, and in neither work nor education (figure 3).

FIGURE 3
Share of Months That Young Parents Spent in Work and Education from Birth of Child to Age 30



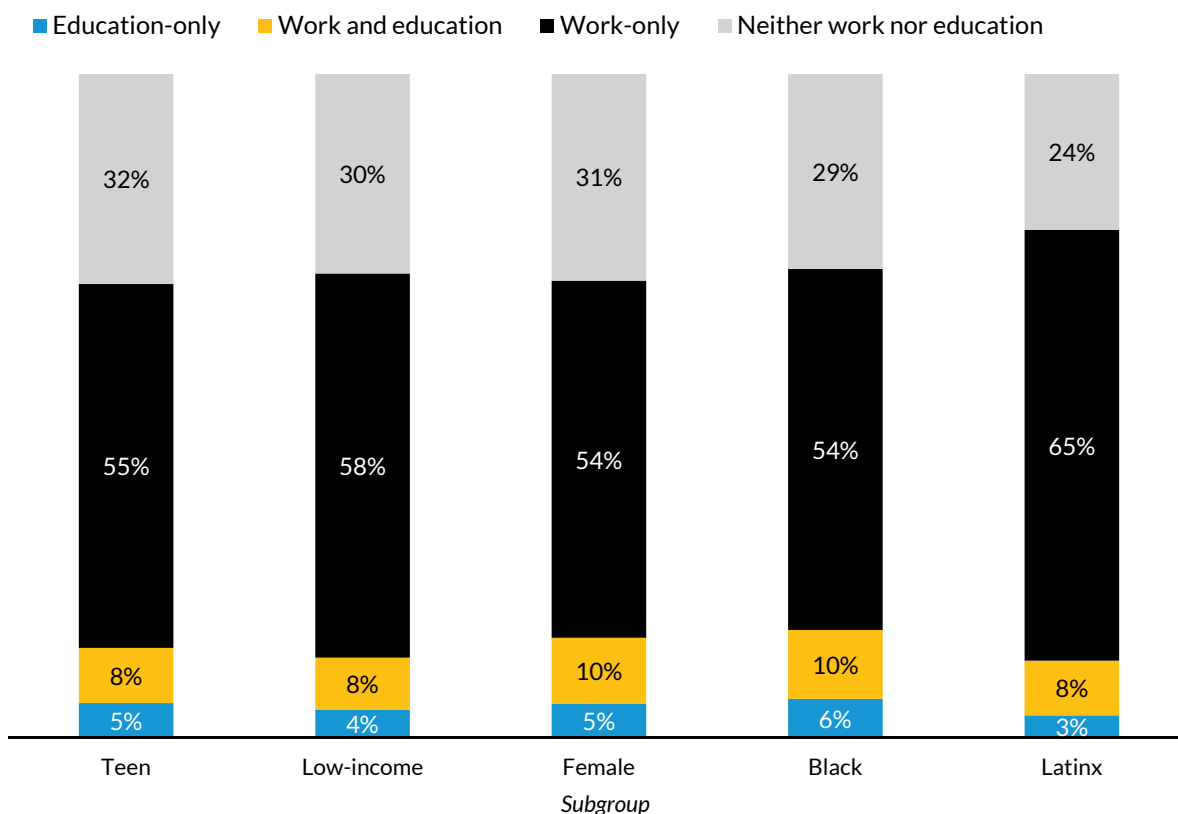
Notes: $N = 2,840$. Months in which the work or education status was unknown are considered missing. Vacation time was not counted as actively being in education.

Through age 30, the largest share of young parents' time was spent only working (61 percent). Young parents spent an average of 4 percent of their time only in education and 9 percent of their time combining work and education. They spent a total of about 13 percent of months enrolled in education, whether working or not. This means that when young parents were in education, more often than not they were also working. On average, about one-fourth of the time (26 percent) they were disconnected from work and education.¹⁸

Figure 4 shows the breakdown of work and education by demographic group. Although the overall picture is not vastly different across groups, a few notable variations stand out. Teen parents (32 percent), low-income parents (30 percent), and black parents (29 percent) all had above-average amounts of time disconnected and below-average amounts of time only working. Female parents were on average more disconnected (31 percent versus 26 percent), were only working less than average (54 percent versus 61 percent), and were in education more than average (15 percent versus 13 percent). This could reflect a mixed sample that includes a diverse spectrum of individuals, from married stay-at-home mothers (who appear disconnected) to single mothers pursuing higher education to access

increased earnings. Black parents and female parents both spent slightly more time combining work and education, at 10 percent. Latinx parents spent the least amount of time in education (3 percent only in education, and 11 percent total) of any demographic group we examined. They also spent the highest amount of time only working (65 percent).

FIGURE 4
Percentage of Months That Young Parents Spent in Work and Education from Birth of Child to Age 30, by Key Subgroup



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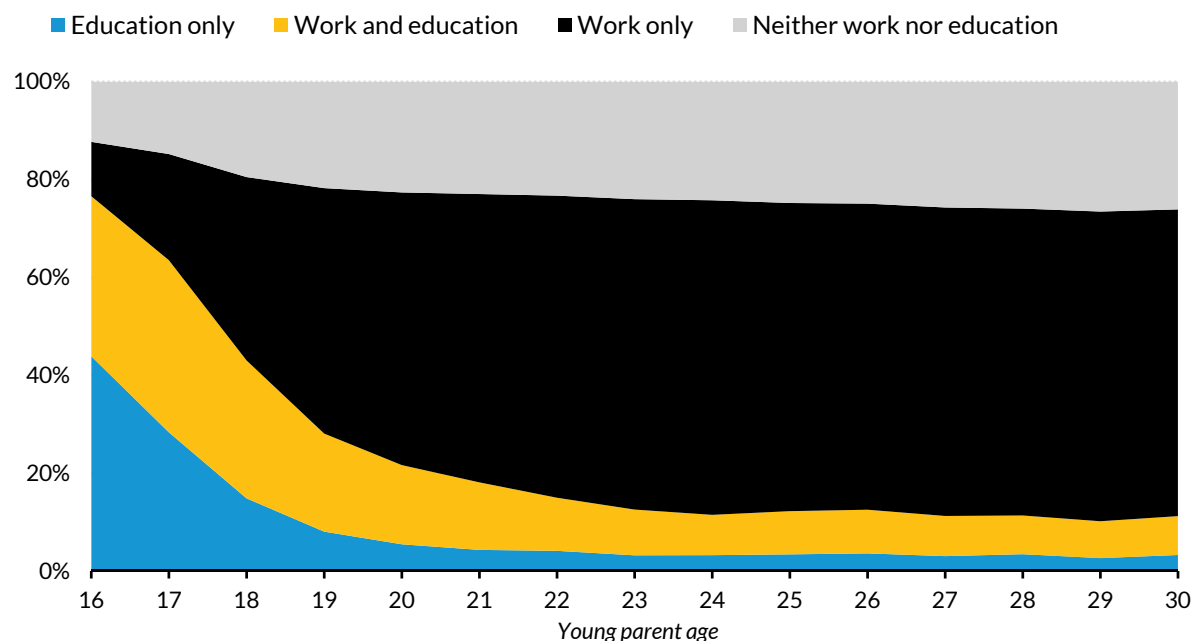
Notes: N ranges from 2,067 to 2,840. Months in which the work or education status was unknown are considered missing. Vacation time was not counted as actively being in education.

Young parents who completed college or obtained a degree by age 30 (16 percent) spent much more of their time in education.¹⁹ Those parents spent 23 percent of their time combining work and education and 9 percent only in education, for a total of 31 percent of their time in education. That is more than double the time spent in education by young parents who did not complete college or obtain a degree (13 percent). Young parents who completed college or obtained a degree also spent below-average amounts of time only working (54 percent versus 64 percent) and disconnected (14 percent

versus 26 percent). Young parents who complete college or obtain any kind of degree were much less disconnected and spent almost one-quarter of their time combining work and education.

The share of time in each category reflects the average of many possible patterns. In figure 5 we show amount of time spent in work and education by young parents at each age over time. For every parent, the share of time in work and education at each age is calculated out of a total of 12 months in that year.²⁰

FIGURE 5
Young Parents' Percentage of Time Spent in Work and Education in Each Year from Birth of Child Through Age 30, for All Young Parents



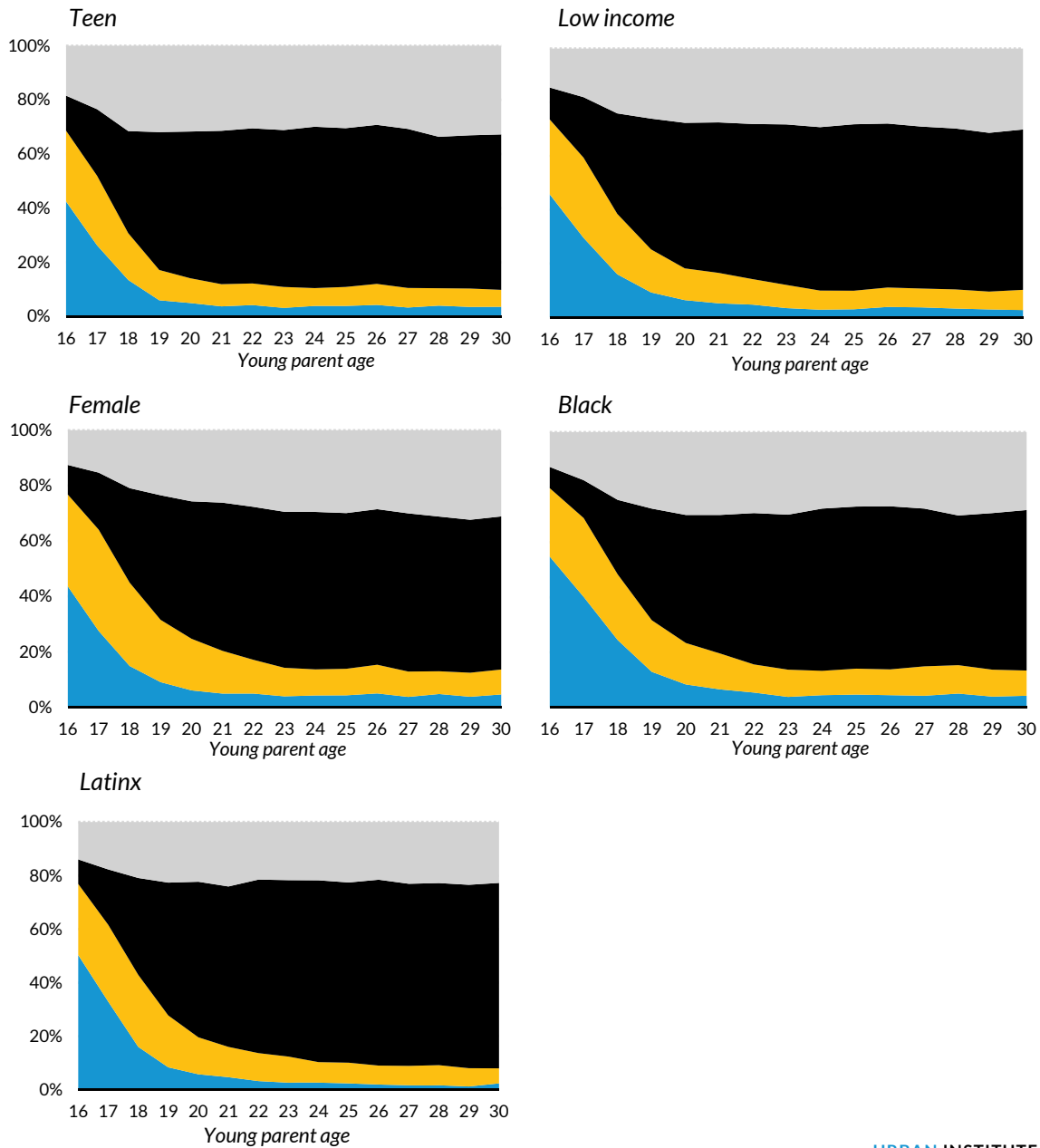
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Notes: N ranges from 1,635 to 2,967. Data are included only for years when an individual had his or her first child through age 30.

Young parents spent well over half their time in education in their teen years (77 percent at age 16). That share dropped off quickly as they aged. By age 22, young parents were in education 15 percent of the time, and at age 29 they spent an average of only 10 percent of their time in education. Except for when they were 16, young parents combined work and education more than they were only in education. Time spent disconnected gradually increased to 26 percent as they got older. However, only working became parents' dominant activity at age 18 (38 percent) and accounted for about 62 percent of time from ages 22 to 30.

FIGURE 6

Young Parents' Percentage of Time Spent in Work and Education in Each Year from Birth of Child Through Age 30, by Key Subgroup



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Notes: N ranges from 413 to 1,731. Data are included only for years when an individual had his or her first child through age 30.

These trends remain largely the same across subgroups (figure 6). Some of the key variations noted above remain apparent. Through age 22, the share of black parents who are only working is lower than any other subgroup, and this is especially acute at ages 16 and 17 (8 and 14 percent of their time

employed, respectively). This suggests a lack of early employment opportunities for young black parents relative to other groups. Latinx parents engaged in the smallest share of education in their late twenties, with as little as 1 percent of their time only in education and another 7 percent in both work and education. The ratio of time spent combining work and education compared with being only in education was also the largest for Latinx parents, suggesting that they pursued education less than any demographic group we analyzed.

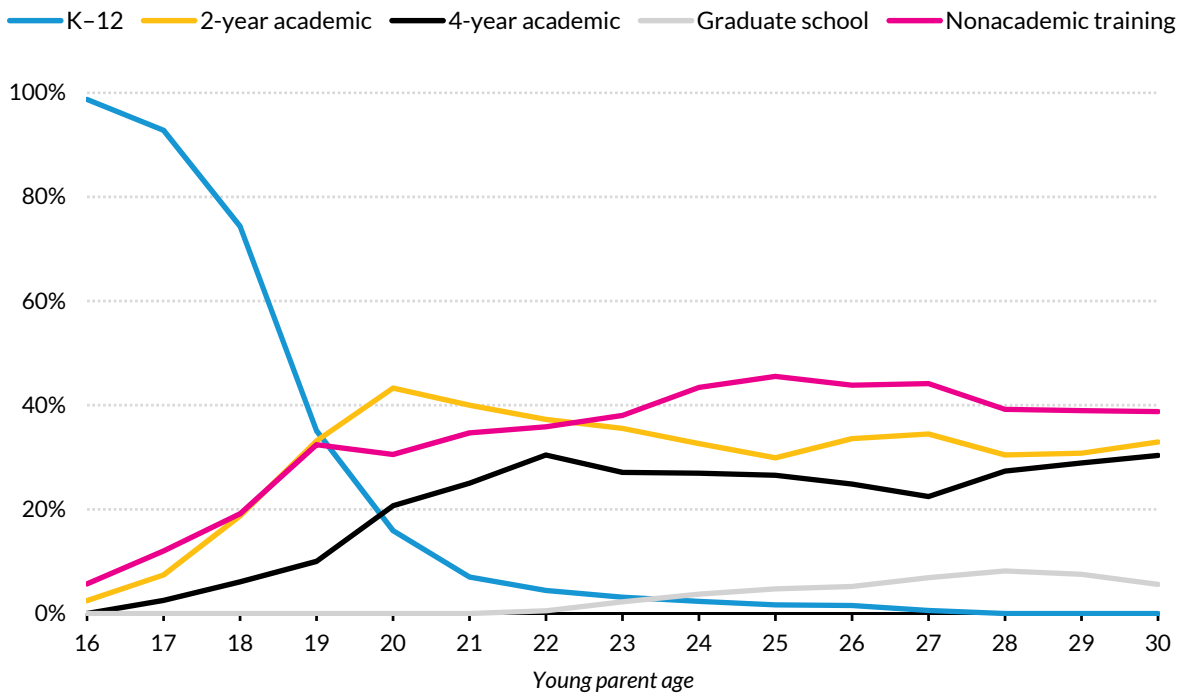
By Age 30, Most Parents in Education Were in Nonacademic Training Programs

The education patterns of young parents through age 30 can shed light on what kinds of education they pursue to obtain employment and support their family. Young parents are sometimes referred to as “nontraditional students” because they have dependent children and therefore have specific needs to succeed in postsecondary education.²¹ Nontraditional students are also people in postsecondary education who are older than the typical college age of 18 to 22. For some young parents, vocational or jobs skills trainings may be a logical choice because they are usually shorter than two- or four-year academic degrees and may have lower barriers to entry, enabling a more direct path to a job.

Figure 7 shows the share of young parents participating in each type of education by age. We find that even during more traditional college-age years, both two-year degrees and nonacademic training were more common than four-year college, but parents steadily participated in each type of postsecondary degree program through age 30. By age 23, the largest share was in nonacademic vocational training (38 percent). This remained true through age 30, and by that age, 42 percent of young parents had obtained a nonacademic vocational certificate or license. Two-year academic degrees at one point represented 43 percent of enrollment and was about one-third of parents’ education enrollment by age 30. The share of young parents in education attending a four-year college reached a maximum of 30 percent at age 22, dropped to a low of 22 percent by age 27, and by age 30 returned to its peak of 30 percent.

FIGURE 7

Young Parents' Participation in Types of Education from Birth of Their First Child Through Age 30



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Notes: N ranges from 1,936 to 3,318. Percentages are out of parents who reported being enrolled in education in each year. Percentages across all categories may add to more than 100 percent, because parents may have been involved in two separate types of education within a year.

Female Parents Experienced the Highest Percentage of Child Care or Pregnancy-Related Interruptions to Work and Education

Young parents may face difficult choices to meet the needs of their child. Those with fewer resources may be confronted by the need to provide for their family financially and by their inability to afford child care or access free care from family members.²² Parents faced with tough decisions might feel they have no other option but to take a break from education or work. Some of those breaks, although necessary in the short term, may lead to future economic struggles. The availability of supports from educational institutions, employers, and organizations could help stave off these tough decisions.

Table 3 shows the share of young parents who reported child care or pregnancy was the reason they left school, were not searching for a job, or took a paid or unpaid absence from work.²³ Of all young parents, about 15 percent reported leaving school at some point because of child care- or pregnancy-related needs. Furthermore, around one in five parents specifically reported not searching for a job or

taking an unpaid leave of absence because of child-related needs. Another 28 percent took a paid leave of absence from work.

TABLE 3

Percentage of Young Parents Who Experienced Interruptions to Work or Education Due to Child Care or Pregnancy Related Needs, From the Year When They Had Their First Child to Age 30

Subgroup	Left school	Did not search for a job	Unpaid leave of absence	Paid leave of absence
All	15	21	22	28
Low income	16	19	20	23
Female	23	34	35	33
Black	18	18	18	24
Latinx	15	19	22	31
Teen	22	23	24	21

Notes: N = 3,319. Individual young parents can be in multiple categories.

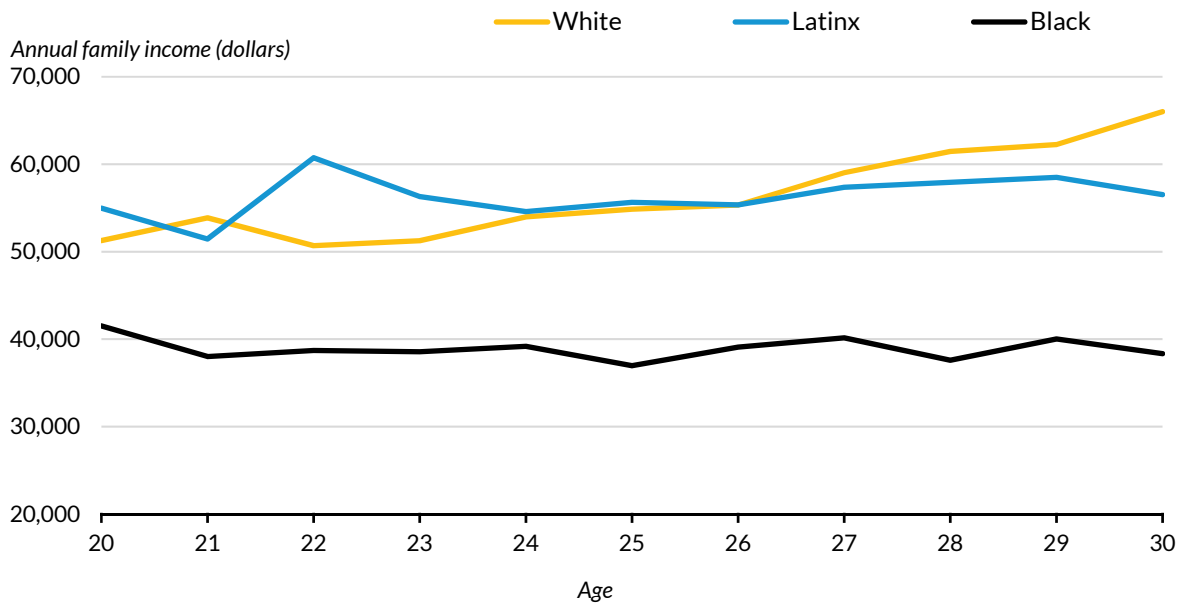
Of our groups, female parents were mostly likely to report taking absences from work and education because of child care- or pregnancy-related needs. Of these parents, one-third did not search for a job (34 percent), one-third took an unpaid leave of absence from work (35 percent), and almost one-fourth (23 percent) left school. Taken together, approximately one-half of young mothers reported at least one of those interruptions (individual young parents can be in multiple categories). Providing young mothers with options and flexibility when child-related interruptions occur can help them prevent these breaks from becoming permanent.

Young Black Parents’ Income Remains Stagnant, While White and Latinx Parents Exhibit More Upward Earning Mobility as They Age

Prior research on socioeconomic equality has shown some upward mobility among Latinx individuals but a stalled or increasing earnings gap for black individuals (especially black men) over time (Chetty et al. 2019).²⁴ These inequities are apparent in figure 8, which shows young parents’ family earnings over time by race or ethnicity. Across all ages, when family income was recorded, black parents’ families earned more than \$10,000 a year less than white and Latinx parents’ families.²⁵ At ages 22 and 23, Latinx parents earned more than white parents, likely because of the differences in work and education participation we noted. By age 30, black parent households earned \$18,000 less per year than Latinx households, who in turn earned about \$9,000 less per year than white households (\$66,000). These trends reflect longstanding societal inequities and discrimination.

FIGURE 8

Family Earnings of Young Parents from Ages 20 to 30, by Race or Ethnicity



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Notes: *N* ranges from 255 to 787. “Other” race category is omitted because of small sample size. Data on family income were not available for any parents younger than age 19. Dollars are nominal.

Young Parent Life Outcomes at Age 30

We’ve shown that young parents of various backgrounds engage in different patterns of work and education in their twenties. This section explores the associations between participation in work or education and life outcomes, such as income, in early adulthood. We also show that there are significant differences in life status at age 30 across different groups of young parents.

Although young parents can overcome barriers and improve their family’s circumstances, their characteristics when they had their first child may influence their life course. Success can be measured in many ways other than income. But for many young parents, earning a family-sustaining wage (or having a partner who does) by early adulthood is crucial. Accessing better job security and an income that can support their family is a primary motivator for parents participating in education during their twenties. Although some parents choose not to work, that is often because their family income enables them to do so. Others who are not working may be unable to find work because they lack credentials or opportunities, they are disabled, or they are struggling in some other way (Sandstrom et al. 2014).

Teen, Low-Income, And Black Parents Earned Less at Age 30 Than Other Young Parents

Young parents' characteristics at the birth of their first child are associated with income, education, and benefits status at age 30. Teen, low-income, and black parents were disadvantaged in income and education when they had their first child and continued to be at age 30 (table 4), often by significant margins. Of teen parents, more than half (53 percent) had only completed high school or less, while 13 percent had completed college or obtained a degree by age 30, less than any other group. Low-income parents also had less education at age 30 than other groups. Teen, low-income, and black parents were also more likely than other young parents to be receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families benefits at age 30.

TABLE 4

Education, Benefits, and Income of Young Parents at Age 30, by Subgroup.

Subgroup	High school or less (%)	Some college (%)	Completed college or obtained degree (%)	TANF (%)	SNAP (%)	Average Annual Income (\$ Thousands)	
						Family	Individual
All	42	38	21	5	29	57	29
Teen	53	34	13	7	35	50	24
Low income	48	35	17	7	36	46	25
Female	36	39	25	7	38	57	22
Black	41	38	20	8	35	39	23
Latinx	45	40	15	6	27	58	30

Notes: N ranges from 962 to 2,947. All differences are statistically significant. Education categories cover all parents with non-missing statuses and they are mutually exclusive. Degrees include associate's, bachelor's, master's, professional, and doctoral.

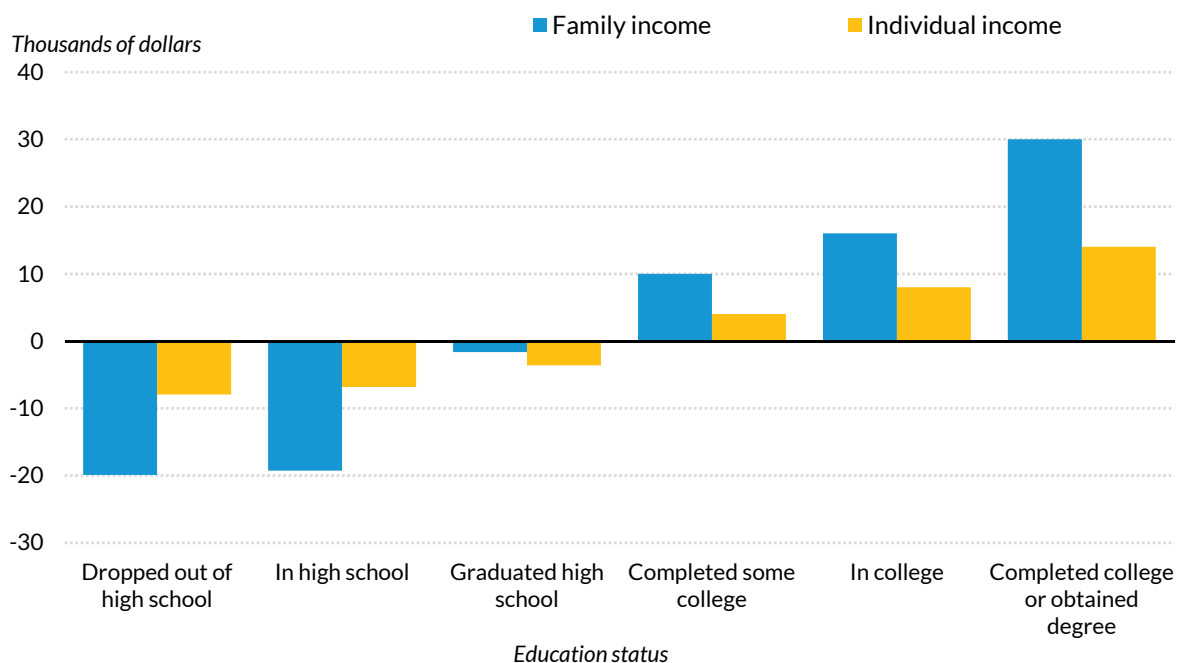
Similar results are apparent in the levels of individual and family income. At age 30, young parents earned an average total annual individual income of approximately \$29,000 and a family income of \$57,000. Some subgroups earned much less. Individually, teen parents, black parents, parents who were low income when they had their first child, and female parents all earned \$25,000 or less at age 30. Black parents had the lowest family income of any key subgroup and were \$19,000 below the average across all young parents' families. Latinx parents earned about the average at both the individual and family level; they had between the income of black and white parents.

In addition to academic degrees, 37 percent of young parents had completed some type of vocational or occupational training by age 30. The most common nonacademic credential was a certificate of completion, which was held by 29 percent of young parents. About 15 percent of parents obtained an occupational license or certification and 3 percent obtained other nonacademic credentials. Nonacademic credentials are obtained from trainings that vary in length and intensity but that are generally designed to increase a person's work-related skillset and labor market options.

Young Parents' Education Status When They Had Their First Child Is Associated with Their Income at Age 30

Young parents who were further along in their education when they had their first child had higher annual incomes at age 30. Figure 9 shows the change in annual family and individual income at age 30 for the education status when the parent had his or her first child, measured relative to parents who were not in that status. Parents who dropped out of high school or who were in high school when they had their first child earned \$8,000 and \$7,000 less than other young parents, respectively. Young parents who had some college experience (but were not currently enrolled) and those who were in college earned \$4,000 and \$8,000 more per year than other parents, respectively. College experience, even if it doesn't lead to a degree, can still help increase earnings (Giani, Attewell, and Walling 2019). And young parents who had completed college or obtained a degree by the birth of their first child earned \$14,000 more individually, and \$30,000 more per family, than parents in other statuses. Young parents who had obtained nonacademic credentials when they had their first child also earned more at age 30 than those who hadn't.

FIGURE 9
Differences in Family and Individual Income at Age 30 by Young Parents' Education Status When They Had Their First Child



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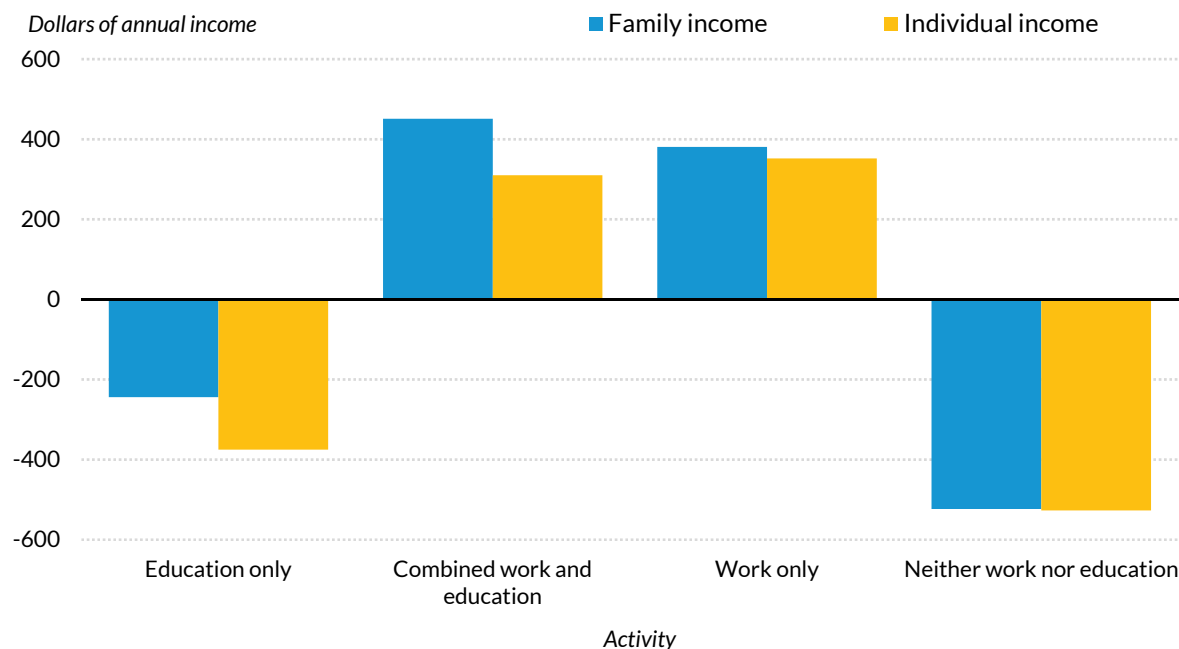
Notes: N ranges from 2,437 to 2,589. Statuses are based on education status and grade level reported when the parent had his or her first child. Categories cover all parents with no-missing statuses and are mutually exclusive. Degrees include professional, associate's, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral.

Time Spent Combining Work and Education Is Associated With Family And Individual Income At Age 30

Although young parents' education and income status at the birth of their first child is important, a key question is whether young parents benefit from time they subsequently spent combining work and education. We examined the association between income at age 30 and time spent only working, only in education, combining work and education, and in neither work nor education. We found that those measures were related and that changes in how much time parents spent in education and training were correlated with changes in income at age 30.

The analysis shows the change in dollars of annual family and individual income at age 30 that is associated with an increase of 1 percentage point of time spent in each activity (figure 10).²⁶ For example, an increase from 20 to 21 percent of time only working would be associated with a \$352 increase in annual individual income at age 30, on average. These associations are informative, but many factors other than time in these activities may influence earnings at age 30, including the earnings of the parent's spouse. These associations are interrelated, and as one increases, the other will decrease.

FIGURE 10
Differences in Income at Age 30 Associated with Time Spent in Education or Work



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Note: N ranges from 2,437 to 2,589. All values are statistically significant except for the education-only family income. Coefficients are in dollars of annual income per percentage point increase of predictor.

More time spent combining work and education is associated with higher incomes among parents at age 30. This suggests that those parents were able to obtain some benefit from combining those activities despite the challenge they may have faced in balancing both activities while parenting. Similarly, more time spent disconnected is associated with lower income at age 30. Taking the example of a parent in this sample with 100 months of time between childbirth and age 30, a change from 20 months to 30 months of time spent in neither work nor education would be associated with an expected \$5,000 decrease in annual individual earnings at age 30. Although some young parents may choose not to work or pursue education (possibly because of a spouse with a family-supporting wage), many do not choose to be in that situation, and they may have been disconnected or struggling.

For Teen, Low-Income, and Black Young Parents, the Positive Association of Work and Education Was Larger Than That of Work Only

The same overall trends are observed when the data are restricted to each of the subgroups of interest (table 5).²⁷ A significant increase in individual income at age 30 is associated with a 1 percentage-point increase in the share of time spent combining work and education. For teen, low-income, black, and Latinx parents, this relationship is more than \$600 of annual income per percentage point of time spent combining work and education. A similar but generally smaller increase in individual income is observed across all demographic groups with increased time spent only working. Conversely, across all groups, a decrease of several hundred dollars in individual income was associated with each additional percentage point in neither work nor education. Regardless of the subgroup of young parents, an increase in time spent disconnected is associated with a decrease in individual earnings at age 30.

For the disadvantaged groups of teen, low-income, and black parents, the positive association of combining work and education with income is almost twice as large as that of time spent only working. For other groups, the size of that association is more similar or reversed.

Similar family income trends were observed across subgroups at age 30. This is partially because the individual earnings of one parent often constitute a large portion of family earnings, especially in single-parent households. However, the associations within groups are sometimes almost twice as large for family income as for individual income. A possible explanation is that obtaining additional education or spending time employed influences who young parents meet and marry (discussed in Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen 2010). Overall, young parents' time spent combining work and education (or only working) is associated with positive outcomes for their families' incomes; time spent disconnected is associated with the opposite.

TABLE 5

Young Parents' Association Between Percentage of Months Working, in Education, Both, or Neither, and Their Dollars of Individual or Family Income at Age 30, by Subgroup

	Education only	Work and education	Work only	Neither work nor education
Individual income				
Teen	-287	515	312	-454
Low income	(-156)	309	306	-419
Female	-122	325	224	-369
Black	(-74)	404	190	-414
Latinx	(-253)	407	296	-524
White	-501	275	406	-565
Family income				
Teen	(-279)	747	428	-552
Low income	(-134)	638	316	-416
Female	-341	376	365	-430
Black	(116)	663	365	-579
Latinx	(-259)	682	381	-578
White	(-159)	373	315	-446

Notes: N ranges from 320 to 1,384. Results in parentheses were not statistically significant.

Discussion

This study extends our knowledge of young parents' work and education activities and how they are linked to later life outcomes. The longitudinal nature of the data allows us to provide a detailed view of young parents' work and education patterns from the time of their first child's birth through age 30 and make these connections to outcomes at age 30. The study also shows differences in these patterns for key demographic groups of young parents.

A substantial percentage of young parents are disadvantaged at the time their first child is born. Many have not completed high school (21 percent) or are in high school (15 percent). Few have college experience, and many are teens (37 percent) or have low incomes (50 percent). Both black and Latinx parents are more likely to be teen parents (both 42 percent) and have low incomes (62 and 55 percent, respectively). Female parents also frequently have low incomes (53 percent). Teen, female, and black young parents all earned below average individually and by household. Black parents' households earn \$7,000 below average when they have their first child, and individually they earn \$3,000 below average. A lack of financial resources and less education are two of the most acute ways that young parents feel hardship and are disadvantaged.

Disadvantaged young parents may face difficulties “catching up.” We find that young parents who are disadvantaged (low-income, teen, or minority parents) when they have their first child often earn significantly less at age 30. Economic disparities may even increase during that time, and low-income and teen parents often fall behind in education. Black parents are often the victims of longstanding oppression and encounter further inequities as they age. Young black parents had significantly lower incomes at age 30 than Latinx and white parents. Black parents have a lack of upward mobility, with family incomes that remain constant or even slightly decrease from age 20 to 30.

Although much of young parents’ education occurs before age 24, they continue to be steadily engaged through age 30. From ages 24 to 30, young parents’ share of time only in education remains relatively steady at 3 percent, and their time combining work and education is around 8 percent. During that time, young parents are mostly engaged in vocational or nonacademic training programs as well as two-year degree programs, although more than one-fourth of those in education are in a four-year degree program. Although support can keep young parents from falling behind during ages 16 to 24, parents in education from ages 25 to 30 need support as well.

Time spent combining work and education is associated with higher income at age 30. Young parents spend 9 percent of their time combining work and education through age 30. Those who spend more time combining them have higher earnings at age 30. Each percentage point of time combining work and education is associated with several hundred dollars in increased earnings at age 30. Although combining work and education is often challenging, parents who do can do so improve their economic picture. This is true even within disadvantaged groups who may be short on resources to support themselves. The 61 percent of young parents who combine some work and education are attempting to improve their family’s prospects by pursuing additional education while balancing work and child care. Most young parents struggle with this balancing act (CFRP 2019), and they may benefit from supports that help them persist. Conversely, parents who are not able to combine work and education may benefit from supports that enable them to do so.

Time spent disconnected from work and education is associated with negative outcomes at age 30. Our analysis adds to the body of evidence that disconnection from work and education is associated with negative outcomes. Across all young parents, each percentage point of time spent disconnected is associated with a \$527 decrease in individual income at age 30. For a young parent spending 25 percent of his or her time disconnected compared with 15 percent, this equates to about \$5,000 less in individual income at age 30. Targeting young parents at the earliest opportunity or sign of disconnection for assistance is crucial, because cumulative time spent disconnected through age 30 is

strongly associated with negative income. Across all groups of young parents, the more time spent out of work and school through age 30, the lower earnings are at age 30.

These results show that many young parents are spending time combining work and education, which can lead to positive outcomes. With additional supports, more young parents may be able to participate in education or combine work and education for later benefit. There are a variety of ways that young parents can be supported in obtaining an education. Our companion report (Sandstrom et al. 2019) examines what balancing work and education means for the care of children. In it, the authors highlight the needs for affordable quality care and support for parents who often need care during nontraditional hours; rely on care from family, friends and neighbors; need more hours of care; and carry a large cost burden for care relative to their family earnings.

This and other research suggests the need for targeted strategies and supports to help young parents access and persist in education while they work while also considering the care of their children. Programs can

- Seek to reengage young parents who are disconnected from work and education;
- structure programs to accommodate the complex schedules of parents who work and participate in education;
- assess the child care needs of young parents and help them identify and pay for child care;
- provide supports that lower the costs young parents face, such as tuition assistance, transportation assistance, and help paying for classroom supplies;
- provide counseling and guidance to navigate education programs, parenting, and personal issues; and
- continuously support parents as they navigate this balancing act through their twenties and beyond.

Although overcoming barriers to initial enrollment in education is key, it is equally important that programs are designed to meet parents' ongoing needs and that they provide support for both the expected and unexpected challenges of balancing work, education, and family life to improve longer-term outcomes for young parents and their children.

Appendix: Methods

Sample Definition

Table A.1 shows the intersections between young parent age, survey panel, and year in our sample. Respondents were included in our sample if their first child was born in one of the pink shaded cells. Gray squares are the years in which no NLSY97 survey data were available. Blue squares correspond to the survey panels or years in which young parent life outcomes were examined.

TABLE A.1
National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 Sample Construction Diagram

Panel	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	NA	16	NA	17
	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31
Age	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32
	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33
	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34
	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35

Notes: NA = not available. Pink shading corresponds to panels where our sample of young parents was defined. Blue shading corresponds to outcome panels. Gray shading corresponds to panels that were not available. Panel 1 corresponds to 1997 and each subsequent panel occurs yearly.

Work and Education Calendar Creation and Analysis

We examined the work and education status in each month during the NLSY97 panel year when the respondent's oldest child was born through the year the respondent was 29 or 30. For each month we determined whether the respondent parent was only working, only in education, combining work and education, or engaged in neither. A young parent was considered to have been working in a given month if he or she reported having an employer or actively serving in the military during at least one week of that month. School enrollment data was available at the monthly level, so young parents were indicated as either enrolled or not enrolled in school in a given month. Vacation time was not counted as being in school. Training start and stop dates were used to establish parents' monthly involvement in training.

We divided the total number of months in each activity by the total number of months where the parents' status was known (not missing). For respondents with fewer than 48 months of a known status,

we set their value to missing. For 458 young parents, zero months were known. Another 21 young parents had between 0 and 48 months in which their status was known, and we omitted them from the calendar analysis. The remaining 2,840 young parents had 48 to 168 months where their status was known and were included in the calendar analysis.

Notes

- ¹ It is reasonable to assume that time spent in neither work nor education may not truly equate to “disconnection” for some parents, particularly when not participating in the workforce or in education is voluntary, such as to care for children. However, data presented below suggests that overall referring to that category as disconnected is a reasonable approximation.
- ² “Youth unemployment rate, 11.5 percent; employment–population ratio, 53.2 percent in July 2016,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Economics Daily*, August 22, 2016, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2016/youth-unemployment-rate-11-point-5-percent-employment-population-ratio-53-point-2-percent-in-july-2016.htm>.
- ³ A small number of NLSY97 respondents had children before age 16 and had another child between the ages of 16 and 24. Those individuals are excluded from our analysis to maintain consistency in the definition of those who first became young parents between the ages of 16 to 24.
- ⁴ Our analytic weights are constructed using the person-weight from the panel in which the individual became a young parent.
- ⁵ See figure A.1 for a sample construction diagram showing distribution of young parents across NLSY97 panels as well as the total sample by age cohort and the years in which each panel was conducted.
- ⁶ A parent who was 17 in NLSY97 panel 1 and who had a child at age 24 will have seven panels of parenthood data through age 30. A parent who was 12 in NLSY97 panel 1 and who had a child at age 16 will have 13 panels of parenthood data through age 30, accounting for skipped interview years. See figure A.1.
- ⁷ These metrics are calculated by the NLSY97 survey and were not from the authors’ calculations.
- ⁸ Parents of “other” race (besides black, Latinx, or white) were approximately 1 percent of our young-parent sample. They are included in all aggregate metrics not based on race or ethnicity but are not presented for independent comparison because of sample size.
- ⁹ Although a respondent can be of Hispanic or Latinx ethnicity and still be of any race, Hispanic or Latinx ethnicity was given priority in the creation of this variable.
- ¹⁰ See the methods appendix for further detail on how months were counted. “Education” includes time actively participating in either academic school or nonacademic vocational training.
- ¹¹ Because our analysis measures earnings outcomes at approximately age 30, we did not include time spent at work or in education *during* parents’ age-30 panels.
- ¹² In comparison, in 1997 around 14 percent of people were officially counted as “poor” (US Bureau of the Census 1998b).
- ¹³ In 2014, based on more recent data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation, 19 percent of young parents were black and 31 percent were Latinx.
- ¹⁴ Percentages of nonacademic credential types add to more than 20 percent because young parents could have obtained more than one type of credential.
- ¹⁵ The NLSY97 asked for household income in rounds one through seven and calculated a (more inclusive) family income metric in rounds eight and above. Our definitions span these two methods of data collection. However, for comparison purposes, we discuss household income at the time when parents had their first child because it covered more of our initial sample.

- ¹⁶ Additional analysis shows that across all young parents (ages 16 to 24), those who had their child at a younger age lived in lower-income households at age 16, while those who had their first child at ages 22 to 24 lived in higher-income households at age 16, on average.
- ¹⁷ Although this NLSY97 data does not correspond to any single year, for reference the median household income in 1997 was \$37,000 (US Bureau of the Census 1998a).
- ¹⁸ Although we use the term “disconnected,” some of this time might be school breaks where young people are not working or young parents who have chosen to not participate in work or school to care for children.
- ¹⁹ Types of degrees include nonacademic professional (1 percent of degrees), associate’s (60 percent of degrees), bachelor’s (52 percent of degrees), and postgraduate (7 percent of degrees).
- ²⁰ Months in which the status is unknown are considered “missing” and are not factored into the calculations.
- ²¹ “Definitions and Data: Who is Nontraditional?” National Center for Education Statistics, accessed August 7, 2019, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs/web/97578e.asp>.
- ²² Our companion report (Sandstrom et al. 2019) explores how young parents balance work, education, and childcare on a daily basis over a focal week.
- ²³ “Childcare or pregnancy-related needs” were asked about in tandem in the NLSY97.
- ²⁴ Those differences were not explained by family characteristics, ability, or location (among other possible factors).
- ²⁵ The young parent ages of 16 to 19 are covered by a household income metric, which had a different definition and was less inclusive than family income. By that metric, at age 16, Latinx and black parent households both earned about \$27,000, while white parents’ households earned \$45,000.
- ²⁶ The actual number of months this represents will vary by parent. For example, a parent who spent 10 percent of his or her time in education across 10 years (from age 20 when he or she had a child through age 30) will have spent 12 months out of a total of 120 months in education. Months in which the parent’s work and education statuses are not known are considered missing and are omitted from the analysis.
- ²⁷ We add the racial category of “white” for comparison.

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STATEMENT OF INDEPENDENCE

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