



**PATHWAYS**  
TO  
**POSTSECONDARY  
SUCCESS**

Maximizing Opportunities  
for Youth in Poverty

*PATHWAYS to Postsecondary Success* is a series of mixed-methods studies of the educational pathways of California's lower income youth. Through a series of research briefs and reports, the project aims to advance research on poverty, produce useful tools that improve educational practice, and inform the U.S. policy agenda on the relationship between poverty and education.

*Entering Adulthood in Hard Times* highlights how educational and economic challenges play out differently across particular populations of young adults, drawing specific attention to the similarities and differences between young adults in California and other large states.

# POLICY REPORT

M A Y 2 0 1 3

N u m b e r 5

## **Entering Adulthood in Hard Times** **A Comparative Report on the** **Educational and Economic Status of** **18- to 26-Year-Olds in California**

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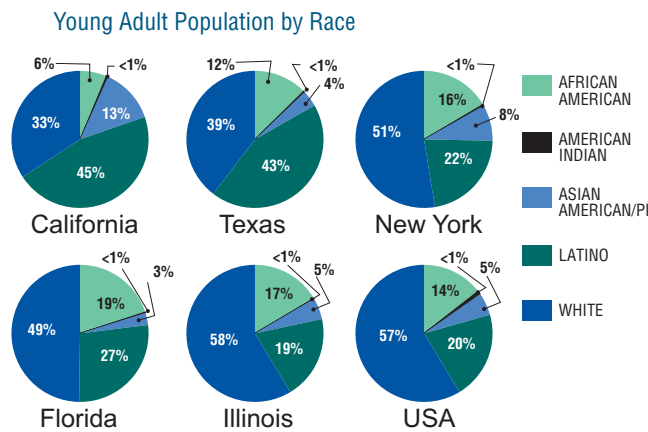
The Great Recession that began in 2008 has left millions unemployed or underemployed and dramatically increased the number of Americans living in poverty. Young adults have been hit particularly hard by the economic downturn. As new entrants into the labor market, they have faced the challenge of being the last hired and, hence, the first fired. Compounding this problem in California is the fact that the job market has been particularly weak, with unemployment rates higher than almost any other state in the nation (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). By September of 2012, California had experienced 44 consecutive months of double-digit unemployment (State of California, 2012).

Even as it offers fewer employment options, California has cut off other avenues for young people to move toward economic security. Falling tax revenues, structural deficits, and an unwillingness of state lawmakers to forge compromise on tax increases have led to reduced educational expenditures. Numerous reports have documented the resulting deteriorating conditions in California's public K–12 schools and system of higher education (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2012; Rogers et al., 2011; Orfield, 2011).

While the recession has had a broad impact, we know from other research that some demographic groups have disproportionately borne the brunt of its effects (Taylor, Kochar et al., 2011; Taylor, Parker et al., 2012). Moreover, the growing economic value of higher education has brought new attention to unequal postsecondary attainment across demographic subgroups. Most policies have attended to the so-called racial achievement gap between white and Asian/Pacific Islander students on the one hand, and Latino and African American students on the other hand. At the same time, a recent set of reports highlighting the challenges facing young men of color has generated new interest in gender-based disparities in educational achievement and economic status (Harris, 2010; Holzman, 2010; Howard, 2008; Jackson & Moore, 2006; Rogers & Freelon, 2012).

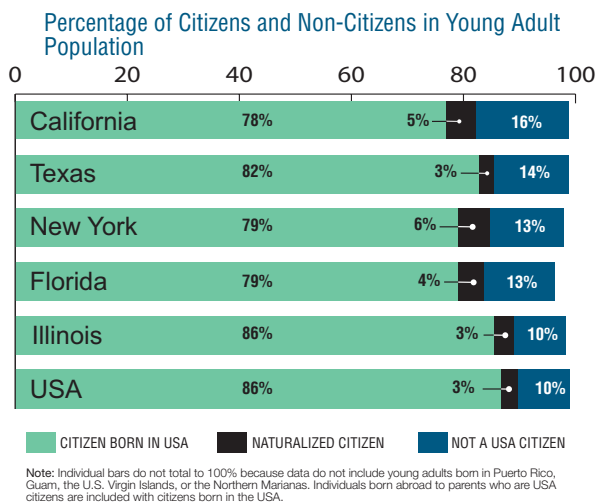
With these issues in mind, this policy brief draws primarily from the 2010 American Community Survey (ACS) to assess the education, employment, and economic conditions of California's young adults. In particular, we

Figure 1



explore how race and gender shape the experiences of 18- to 26-year-olds in the state.<sup>1</sup> To provide context, we compare findings for California’s young adults to national averages and to findings for the four next most populous states—Texas, New York, Florida, and Illinois. Like California, these states embody a good deal of demographic diversity and share a common set of policymaking opportunities and challenges (for example, access to large financial capital and complex and highly differentiated labor markets). Cross-state comparisons highlight California’s distinct characteristics, and hence encourage policymakers to tailor policies to meet the state’s particular needs.

Figure 2



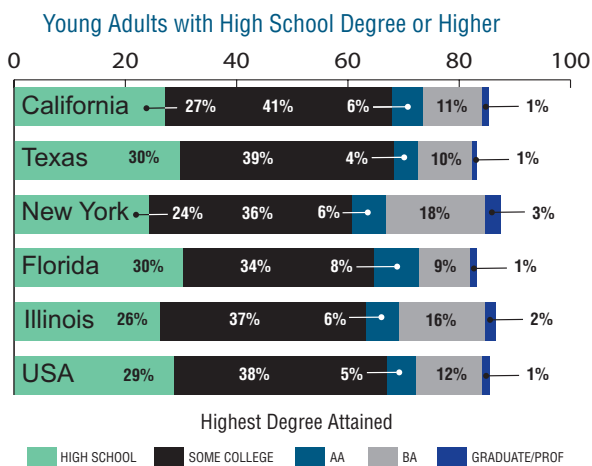
**California’s sizable young adult population is racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse.**

**California’s population includes a sizeable proportion of young adults.** More than 5 million 18- to 26-year-olds live in California, representing 14% of the state’s population. In our comparison states this age group is proportionately similar, from roughly 3 million in Texas (13% of the total population) to about 2.5 million in New York (13%) and Florida (11%), and 1.6 million in Illinois (12%). More than one in eight young adults in the United States live in California.

**Latinos and Asian/Pacific Islanders are well represented among California’s young adult population.**

In the nation as a whole, the majority of young adults are white; California and Texas have the smallest proportions of whites in their young adult populations (**Figure 1**). Indeed, California’s young adults are demographically distinctive; 45% are Latino—a larger proportion than any of the comparison states and more than twice the national average—and 33% are white. The state’s Asian/Pacific Islander population represents a substantially higher proportion than in any other large state (13%) and is more than twice the national figure (5%). African Americans represent only 6% of California’s young adults, in contrast to 14% of young adults across the nation and 16% or more of young adults in New York, Florida, and Illinois.

Figure 3



**Spanish is spoken as frequently as English in the homes of California’s young adults.** Nationally and in all four of our comparison states, a majority of the young adult population speak only English at home. In California, however, 58% of young adults come from households where a language other than English is spoken. Most often, this language is Spanish (41%); more than one in ten (11%) speak an Asian/Pacific Islander language, and 6% speak another non-English language. While Texas has a comparable proportion of young adults who speak Spanish at home, none of the comparison states comes close to California in the proportion of young adults who speak Asian/Pacific Islander languages.

**Most young adults in California are citizens, but the state also has more foreign-born and non-citizen young adults than any other large state.** Although 78% of California’s young adults are citizens who were born in the United States and another 5% are naturalized citizens, members of this age group are still less likely to be born in the United States and less likely to be citizens than their counterparts in other large states (**Figure 2**). Close to one in six (16%) of California’s young adults are not citizens—substantially higher than the national average of 10%, and higher than Texas (14%), New York (13%)

and Florida (13%). Most young adult non-citizens in California are Latino (80%), but a sizeable number are Asian/Pacific Islander (13%) or white (5%). A plurality of naturalized citizens in California’s young adult population are Asian/Pacific Islander (43%), with Latinos representing 37%, and whites 16%.

**Most of California’s young adults finish high school and enroll in college, but they lag behind their counterparts in postsecondary attainment.**

**Young adults in California earn high school diplomas at close to the national rate.** More than eight in ten of (86%) California young adults have attained at least a high school degree (**Figure 3**). This is slightly higher than the national average (85%) and slightly behind Illinois (87%) and New York (87%).<sup>2</sup>

**In California, young adults from certain racial and ethnic groups and young men are less likely than others to have finished high school.** Latinos, African Americans, and American Indians in California are less likely to have earned a high school degree than are the state’s white and Asian/Pacific Islander students (**Table 1**). Within each racial group in California, males are less likely than females to have attained a high school degree.

TABLE 1  
Young Adults Without a High School Degree, by Race and Gender

	California	Texas	New York	Florida	Illinois	United States
<b>Female</b>						
African American	13%	13%	16%	18%	17%	16%
American Indian	13%	13%	11%	28%	15%	22%
Asian American/PI	5%	7%	6%	9%	3%	6%
Latina	19%	22%	18%	17%	18%	20%
White	6%	8%	7%	11%	8%	9%
<b>Male</b>						
African American	18%	20%	26%	30%	30%	25%
American Indian	24%	13%	19%	18%	5%	27%
Asian American/PI	8%	10%	6%	11%	7%	8%
Latino	26%	28%	26%	24%	27%	28%
White	9%	12%	8%	15%	9%	12%

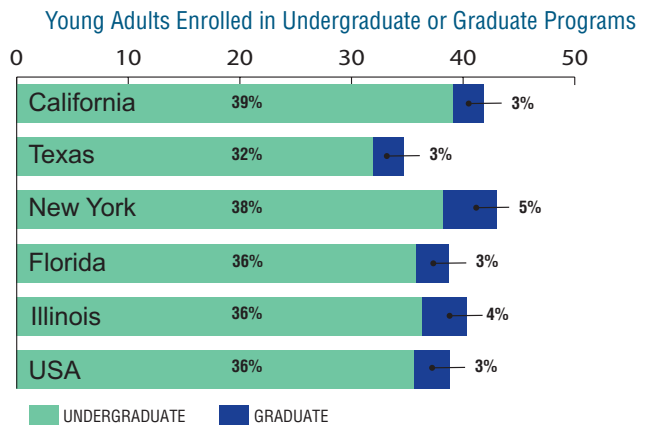
**California’s African American and, to a more limited degree, Latino males typically fare better than their counterparts in other states when it comes to high school graduation rates.** African American males in California are more likely to have a high school degree than are African American males in other large states (a difference of 2% in Texas to 12% in Florida and Illinois). California’s Latino males are slightly more likely than the national average to have a high school degree (a 2% difference). Likewise, young American Indian men in California are slightly more likely than the national average to have a high school diploma (a 3% difference), but they do not graduate from high school as often their counterparts in our comparison states (a difference of 5% in New York to 19% in Illinois).

**With some notable differences, young women graduate from high school more often than young men in the same state and racial group.** In both Florida and Illinois, young American Indian women are less likely to finish high school than are young American Indian men—a 10% difference between the two groups in each state. Moreover, the gap between the percentages of African American males and females who have not attained a high school degree is not as large in California (5%) as it is in Illinois (13%) or the United States as a whole (9%).

**California’s young adults enroll in college at comparatively impressive rates.** California has a higher proportion (39%) of young adults enrolled in undergraduate programs than any other large state or the nation as a whole. When we consider enrollment in undergraduate and graduate programs combined, California is second only to New York (42% and 43%, respectively). See **Figure 4**.

**California’s young adults complete bachelor’s or higher degrees less often than young adults elsewhere.** Fewer than one in eight young adults in California (12%) has attained a bachelor’s, graduate, or professional degree, putting them behind the national average (13%) and significantly behind Illinois (18%) and New York (21%) in college attainment rates. White and Asian/Pacific Islander young adults are far more likely than Latino, African American, and American Indian young adults to have attained at least a bachelor’s degree, and young women have higher rates of bachelor’s attainment than young men.

Figure 4



**Young Latino males’ college completion rates in California are troubling.** While 25% of the state’s Asian/Pacific Islander women have attained at least a bachelor’s degree, only 4% of Latino males have reached this milestone (**Table 2**). California’s Latino males are slightly less likely than Latino males in most other large states to attain a four-year degree or higher. On the other hand, California’s young African American males are more likely to attain a college degree or higher than are young African American males in other states.

**Young adults in California are more often unemployed and living in poverty.**

**California’s employment record for young adults is mixed in comparison to the nation and other large states.** More than half (56%) of California’s young adult population reported working 20 hours per week or more, and a little more than half of this group (30% of all young adults) are working full time. Nationally, a higher proportion of young adults are working at least 20 hours per week (62%) and working full-time (34%). In other large states, a smaller percentage of young adults are working in general, but a larger percentage are working full-time.

**Employment patterns vary by demographic group.** In California, white males (62%) and Latino males (62%) are most likely to be employed at least 20 hours per week, with white women close behind (58%). Only 52% of Latina women have this level of employment—10 percentage points behind young Latino men. In California and across our comparison states, Asian/Pacific Islander, African American, and

**TABLE 2**  
 Young Adults Attaining a Bachelor's, Graduate, or Professional Degree, by Race and Gender

	California	Texas	New York	Florida	Illinois	United States
<b>Female</b>						
African American	8%	8%	12%	7%	9%	8%
American Indian	6%	3%	6%	3%	0%	5%
Asian American/PI	25%	24%	34%	21%	29%	26%
Latina	6%	6%	14%	11%	10%	8%
White	21%	20%	31%	15%	26%	20%
<b>Male</b>						
African American	8%	4%	7%	4%	5%	5%
American Indian	5%	7%	13%	9%	13%	3%
Asian American/PI	19%	25%	32%	19%	27%	21%
Latino	4%	4%	7%	6%	6%	4%
White	15%	14%	22%	11%	20%	14%

**TABLE 3**  
 Young Adults Working 20+ Hours per Week, by Race and Gender

	California	Texas	New York	Florida	Illinois	United States
<b>Female</b>						
African American	47%	62%	48%	51%	46%	54%
American Indian	42%	53%	68%	70%	11%	53%
Asian American/PI	45%	47%	44%	43%	43%	48%
Latina	52%	58%	51%	57%	59%	56%
White	58%	67%	62%	61%	64%	64%
<b>Male</b>						
African American	46%	55%	43%	43%	39%	48%
American Indian	54%	74%	50%	68%	52%	55%
Asian American/PI	43%	50%	50%	54%	49%	50%
Latino	62%	70%	55%	60%	67%	65%
White	62%	73%	64%	64%	67%	69%

American Indian men and women are generally less likely to be employed at this level than are men and women from other racial groups. See **Table 3**.

**African American men in California do not encounter the same gender gap in employment faced by their counterparts in other large states.** In our comparison states, African American females are more likely to be employed at least 20 hours per week

than are African American males—the gap is largest in Texas (62% versus 55%, or a 7% difference) and smallest in New York (48% versus 43%, or a 5% difference). In comparison, the difference between African American men and women in California is only 1% (47% of young women, compared to 46% of men).

### Postsecondary Education and Employment

The shift from a manufacturing-based to a service- and information-based economy has meant that postsecondary educational attainment has become increasingly important for young adults as they seek secure, well-paid employment. Whereas only 26% of the middle class had attended college in 1970, now 61% of the middle class has done so. Jobs requiring a college degree pay more than other jobs, and this gap has grown substantially since the mid-1970s (Carnevale et al., 2010).

A recent study from the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce highlights the relationship between low educational attainment and high levels of unemployment among young workers. *The College Advantage: Weathering the Economic Storm* finds that the unemployment rate for new high school graduates is nearly four times as high as for new college graduates (24% versus 7%, respectively). The study also points out that 78% of the jobs lost in 2008 and 2009 were held by workers with a high school degree or less, and that the bulk of new jobs added during recovery have gone to college-educated workers (Carnevale et al., 2012).

TABLE 4  
Average Hourly Wage for Young Adults, by Race and Gender

	California	Texas	New York	Florida	Illinois	United States
<b>Female</b>						
African American	\$8.38	\$7.99	\$9.75	\$7.53	\$6.98	\$7.76
American Indian	\$6.95	\$7.76	\$10.19	\$5.44	*	\$7.40
Asian American/PI	\$10.68	\$7.54	\$11.02	\$8.24	\$9.69	\$9.80
Latina	\$8.67	\$7.37	\$9.42	\$8.72	\$8.20	\$8.31
White	\$10.05	\$8.81	\$10.35	\$8.34	\$8.87	\$8.58
<b>Male</b>						
African American	\$8.66	\$8.01	\$9.39	\$7.92	\$7.96	\$8.01
American Indian	\$9.10	\$8.56	\$7.59	\$7.67	*	\$7.65
Asian American/PI	\$10.91	\$11.17	\$11.78	\$7.95	\$9.47	\$9.98
Latino	\$9.26	\$8.38	\$10.48	\$8.58	\$9.25	\$8.88
White	\$10.51	\$9.58	\$10.51	\$8.72	\$9.56	\$9.20

\* = No Data

**Wages earned by California’s young adults are not equal across racial and ethnic groups.** Young adults earn, on average, between \$8 and \$10 per hour in each of the large states (including California), though there are significant differences by race and gender (Table 4). In California—as well as nationally and in some comparison states—whites and Asian/Pacific Islanders have higher wages than other groups. California males earn more than females of the same race, but this general pattern does not always

hold true in other states; for example, in New York, African American males earn slightly less than African American females.

**In California, as in other states, some workers are more likely than others to earn a livable wage.** Because in many areas minimum wage is not sufficient to cover basic living expenses, we looked to see what portion of young adults are earning at least \$15 per hour. In California, 12% of young adults

### The Great Recession

The recession that began in 2008 has been deep and sustained. The U.S. labor market lost 8.4 million jobs in 2008 and 2009, a constriction of 6%. To put this decline in context, the recession of the early 1980s only reduced the number of available jobs by 3%. Moreover, unemployment has lasted far longer than in previous recessions. More than 40% of the unemployed in 2010 were out of work for more than six months, compared to 26% of the unemployed out of work for this same duration in 1983 (Mishel, Bivens, Gould, & Shierholz, 2012). Numerous studies suggest that the recession has taken a particularly hard toll on young adults (U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee, 2010; Taylor et al., 2012).

TABLE 5  
Unemployment Rates for Young Adults in 2007 and 2010

	California	Texas	New York	Florida	Illinois	United States
<b>2007</b>	12%	11%	13%	12%	14%	12%
<b>2010</b>	20%	15%	17%	21%	18%	18%
<b>% Increase</b>	8%	4%	4%	9%	4%	6%

meet this threshold; white and Asian/Pacific Islander workers are more likely than other workers to earn at least \$15 per hour, and young men are slightly more likely to earn at least \$15 per hour than are young women. These patterns generally hold true across states, though in all large states except California, African American women are more likely than African American men to earn more than \$15 per hour.

**The unemployment rate is high for all workers in California, but particularly so for young adults.** Roughly one in eight (13%) of all California’s workers and one in five of its young adults (20%) were unemployed in 2010. These figures are higher than the national averages of 11% and 18%, respectively, and exceed the rates in all of the comparison states, with the exception of Florida (13% and 21%, respectively).

**The recession has dramatically increased unemployment rates among California’s young adults.** We drew additional data from the 2007 American Community Survey to compare unemployment rates in 2010 (at the height of the recession) with those from before the recession began (Table 5). In California, the young adult unemployment rate increased by 8% in these years, growing from 12% to 20%. In fact, while the unemployment rate for

young adults has grown during the recession across all the most populous states, California and Florida have experienced the largest increases (8% and 9%, respectively).

**Certain demographic groups experience higher unemployment rates.** In California, Latino, African American, and American Indian young adults had the highest 2010 unemployment rates, and this pattern generally holds true across the other large states (Table 6). In most instances, African American males had the highest rate of unemployment—as high as 38% in Illinois. Latinos had higher unemployment rates than Latinas (a difference of 1% in Texas to 3% in Florida), though in most cases the differences were not as substantial as for African Americans, who faced a gender gap of 2% in California to 8% in Texas, New York, and Florida.

**More young people were living below the federal poverty line in 2010 than before the recession.** Nearly one in five young adults in California (19%) was poor in 2010, compared with 14% in 2007 (Table 7). This figure is roughly on par with the national average (21%), Illinois (20%), Texas (22%) and Florida (22%). It is slightly higher than the rate for young adults in New York (18%).

TABLE 6  
2010 Unemployment Rates for Young Adults, by Race and Gender

	California	Texas	New York	Florida	Illinois	United States
<b>Female</b>						
African American	29%	21%	23%	29%	34%	27%
American Indian	19%	11%	11%	19%	*	22%
Asian American/PI	15%	13%	14%	13%	12%	13%
Latina	21%	14%	21%	17%	18%	18%
White	15%	11%	11%	15%	11%	12%
<b>Male</b>						
African American	31%	29%	31%	37%	38%	34%
American Indian	39%	16%	20%	18%	63%	33%
Asian American/PI	20%	14%	21%	23%	15%	18%
Latino	23%	15%	23%	20%	19%	20%
White	19%	12%	17%	20%	16%	17%

TABLE 7  
Young Adults Living in Poverty in 2007 and 2010

	California	Texas	New York	Florida	Illinois	United States
<b>2007</b>	14%	20%	16%	16%	16%	17%
<b>2010</b>	19%	22%	18%	22%	20%	21%
<b>% Increase</b>	6%	3%	2%	6%	4%	4%

TABLE 8  
Young Adults Living in Poverty in 2010, by Race and Gender

	California	Texas	New York	Florida	Illinois	United States
<b>Female</b>						
African American	30%	32%	25%	36%	38%	33%
American Indian	31%	27%	25%	32%	*	33%
Asian American/PI	20%	24%	17%	23%	17%	20%
Latina	24%	28%	27%	23%	22%	26%
White	19%	22%	16%	20%	19%	21%
<b>Male</b>						
African American	23%	23%	21%	26%	27%	24%
American Indian	26%	13%	10%	22%	*	29%
Asian American/PI	17%	18%	15%	20%	14%	17%
Latino	18%	20%	22%	20%	15%	19%
White	16%	16%	13%	17%	15%	16%

\* = No Data



**Across states, young women are more likely than young men to fall below the federal poverty line, especially in certain racial/ethnic groups.**

In California, young American Indian (31%), African American (30%) and, to a lesser degree, Latina (24%) women are most likely to be living in poverty (**Table 8**). Among the state's male young adult population, American Indians (26%) and African Americans (23%) are the most likely to fall into this economic category.

## Summary and Implications

California has distinct characteristics that lead to a set of recommendations for policymakers and researchers specifically concerned with improving the economic and educational circumstances of the state's young adult population:

- **The ethnic, racial, and linguistic diversity of California's young adult population is a unique resource that must not be overlooked.** Educational and employment policy should take into account language and cultural barriers that can result from the English language learner or immigrant status of many of California's young adults. At the same time, however, the diversity of experiences that the state's young people bring to their schooling and work should be viewed as a rich resource of great benefit.
- **Educational policy must look beyond college enrollment to ensure that students also graduate from college.** While postsecondary enrollment levels are comparatively high, California's 18- to 26-year-olds do not finish college as often as those in other large states. Outreach must extend beyond college preparation and high school graduation to include support for persistence and completion.
- **Educational and employment policy must be attentive to the needs of particular demographic subgroups.** Although this implication, in its broadest terms, certainly applies to all of our comparison states, there are particular issues that must receive greater attention in California. For example, the postsecondary educational achievement of Latino men is extremely troubling. And persistent wage gaps (in California and elsewhere) mean that more women

than men and more Latino, African American, and American Indian young adults are unemployed, underemployed, and/or living in poverty. If our goal is universal access to higher education and employment opportunities with livable wages, we must remain aware of and attentive to the persistent and particular inequities in California.

Our state-level comparisons also lead to a set of recommendations that are useful not only for policymakers and scholars within California but also those concerned with change in other states and at a national level:

- **Policymakers need to move beyond policy silos to think creatively and collaboratively about strategies that can simultaneously broaden access to the labor market and to higher education.** Employment, poverty, and education are too often viewed separately, yet their connections are clearly evident. Policies that recognize these links are particularly important for sub-groups—such as African American and Latino men—who have low rates of both employment and postsecondary attainment.
- **Policymakers and researchers must sustain a focus on inequalities that occur across many states and at the national level.** It is clear from these findings that there are certain inequities that persist, sometimes with slight variance, across our largest, most diverse states (and, in some cases, nationally). Policy that draws on centralized resources to tend to these issues may be more effective than programs that remain isolated and too narrowly focused.
- **Researchers must more closely examine the factors that could be contributing to particular outcomes in certain states.** We need, for example, a greater understanding of why young adults in New York are almost twice as likely as those in California to attain four-year college degrees. Likewise, we must ask why African American and Latino males in California do better on some educational measures than their counterparts in other large states. Once we have a better understanding of these circumstances, policy measures can be designed at the state and

federal levels to ensure widespread success for young adults.

For California's young adults, education, employment, and economic well-being are mutually dependent at the individual level. These issues are also highly interrelated at the state level. For example, better-educated workers yield higher tax revenues and allow the state to save on social service costs. In fact, for every \$1.00 California spends on higher education, the state reaps a net return of \$4.50 (Stiles, Hout, & Brady, 2012). In many ways, California's future is bound up with the prospects of its young adults. The state's 18- to 26-year-olds form an incredibly diverse group, however, and their needs must be addressed accordingly. With the current economic climate, it is possible that their needs have never been greater. Investment in the future is always a good idea, but this is particularly true during hard times.

## Notes

We would like to thank Karen Jarsky for her assistance.

- 1 This brief expands on analyses presented in another brief in the PATHWAYS series, *Educational and Employment Profile of California's Youth* (Terriquez, 2012), though not all figures will correlate between the two. Terriquez also used the American Community Survey, which is conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau on an annual basis, to focus on young adults in California. Terriquez drew on 2009 and 2010 data, however, while we focus on 2010 data in order to illuminate the education, employment, and poverty status of young adults at the height of the Great Recession. We also look at 2007 data in order to explore how young adult unemployment and poverty rates from before and during the recession may differ.
- 2 Our analyses of education, employment, and poverty outcomes exclude young adults who arrived in the United States after the age of 16, whether as immigrants or international students.

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