JOINT CENTER FOR POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC STUDIES

Black Workers and WIOA

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jointcenter.org

Our Mission

The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, America's Black think tank, provides compelling and actionable policy solutions to eradicate persistent and evolving barriers to the full freedom of Black people in America. We are the trusted forum for leading experts and scholars to participate in major public policy debates and promote ideas that advance Black communities. We use evidence-based research, analysis, convenings, and strategic communications to support Black communities and a network of allies.

Workforce Policy

The Joint Center’s workforce policy program centers Black workers in policy debates concerning the future of work, workforce development, and access to good jobs. Our work concentrates on creating solutions to help workers in Black communities as the economy changes.

Why this matters to me

- Years of experience in workforce development professionally
- Concerned about lack of attention to the needs of Black workers that confront racism in the labor market
- Lack of interventions that disrupt systemic barriers to higher earnings and wealth creation
- Personal experience with supporting my brother as a young man who sought help from “opportunity youth” programs

The Future of Black Workers

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- *Education is not the great equalizer*: no matter where Black folks fall on the education spectrum, income and wealth disparities persist (see Darrick Hamilton's work)

- *All jobs should be good jobs*: Yes, education and training has a premium on economic opportunity, but it does not mean that those with fewer credentials should labor in jobs that exploit – especially given the history of Black labor in the United States

The Future of Black Workers means

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- Unmitigated access to education and training opportunities that seamlessly lead to work opportunities that promote economic mobility and wealth creation for Black communities
- Strong supportive services for Black workers in low wage jobs that enable agency for workers to pursue the education and training necessary to move up the ladder
- All Black workers are employed in high quality jobs that offer livable wages, enable wealth creation, offer flexibilities

The Future of Black Workers Research & Policy Agenda

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Workforce Development

Federal, state and local workforce development policy

Program accountability

Registered apprenticeships

Supportive services

Postsecondary access and completion

Job Quality

Quality jobs access

Racial discrimination in hiring and the workplace

Occupational segregation

Labor power

Worker wages and benefits

Automation and displacement

Examples of Current Work

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Preparing Black workers for the future of work

Building off the Joint Center's seminal report on the future of work in the Black Rural South, we are collaborating with the congressional Future of Work Caucus to advance solutions to support Black workers at greater risk of displacement due to automation in the Black Rural South.

Examples of Current Work

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Influencing workforce investments in Build Back Better legislation

Working in coalition with national partners to prioritize Black workers in Biden's Build Back Better recovery package, calling on $80 billion - $100 billion in new workforce investments

Examples of Current Work

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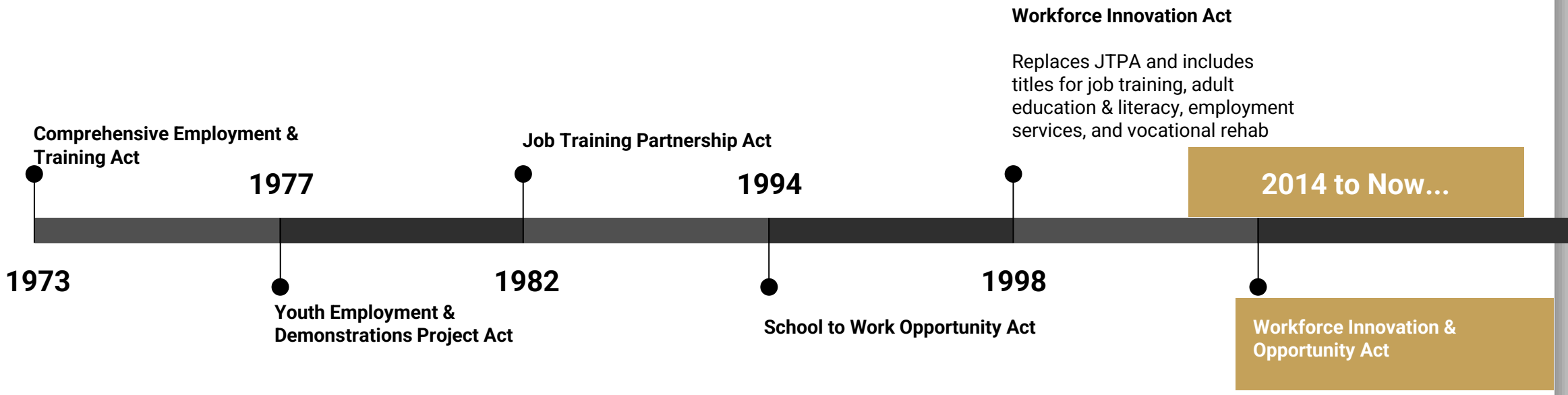
Shaping the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act reauthorization priorities

The Joint Center recently published recommendations for the reauthorization of the country's landmark workforce development law, WIOA. So far, the recommendations have received positive feedback from leaders at U.S. DOL and Ed & Labor committee staff.

Background

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)



Background

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)

Three goals of WIOA:

1. Increase access to education, training, and employment – particularly for people with barriers to employment.
2. Reduce welfare dependency, increase economic self-sufficiency, meet employer needs, and enhance the productivity and competitiveness of the nation
3. Increase the prosperity of workers and employers

Background

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)

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WIOA-funded training programs can be divided into four categories:

A. **Skill development programs**, which increase vocational skills through classroom or on-the-job training

B. **Job-development programs**, which consist of public employment programs where jobs are specifically created for the participants;

C. **Employability development programs**, which, according to Butler and Hobbie (1976) emphasize personal attitudes and attributes needed for employment (i.e., what we would now call “soft skills”); and

D. **Work experience programs**, which provide employment experiences intended to help workers gain the same attitudes and attributes as employability development programs through paid or unpaid work.

Problem

Rarely, if ever, is discourse analyses to understand the role that ideology, language, and power may play in the formation and implementation of the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

“WIOA is a colorblind or race-neutral policy; that is, although its purpose is to provide opportunities to previously marginalized adults, it seeks to apply solutions without consideration for race or the existence of past or present racial discrimination”

Examples of race-neutral “common sense” in workforce policy: The Skills Gap

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The Common Sense Logic:

The skills gap is understood as the primary culprit preventing America’s employers from finding talented workers and keeping Black workers from finding meaningful, living wage employment

Why this is flawed

The skills gap narrative is driven by employers in the low-wage job market, a market where Black workers are overrepresented

The skills gap discourse is used to justify the maintenance of poor labor conditions, particularly among Black workers

There is hypocrisy in expressing concern about the lack of skilled workers while employer-lobbyists/legislators simultaneously pass policies that keep taxes so low in states with larger shares of Black workers that **public K-12 and higher education programs remain underfunded**

WIOA and Black workers

- Black workers are disproportionately represented among those using WIOA services.

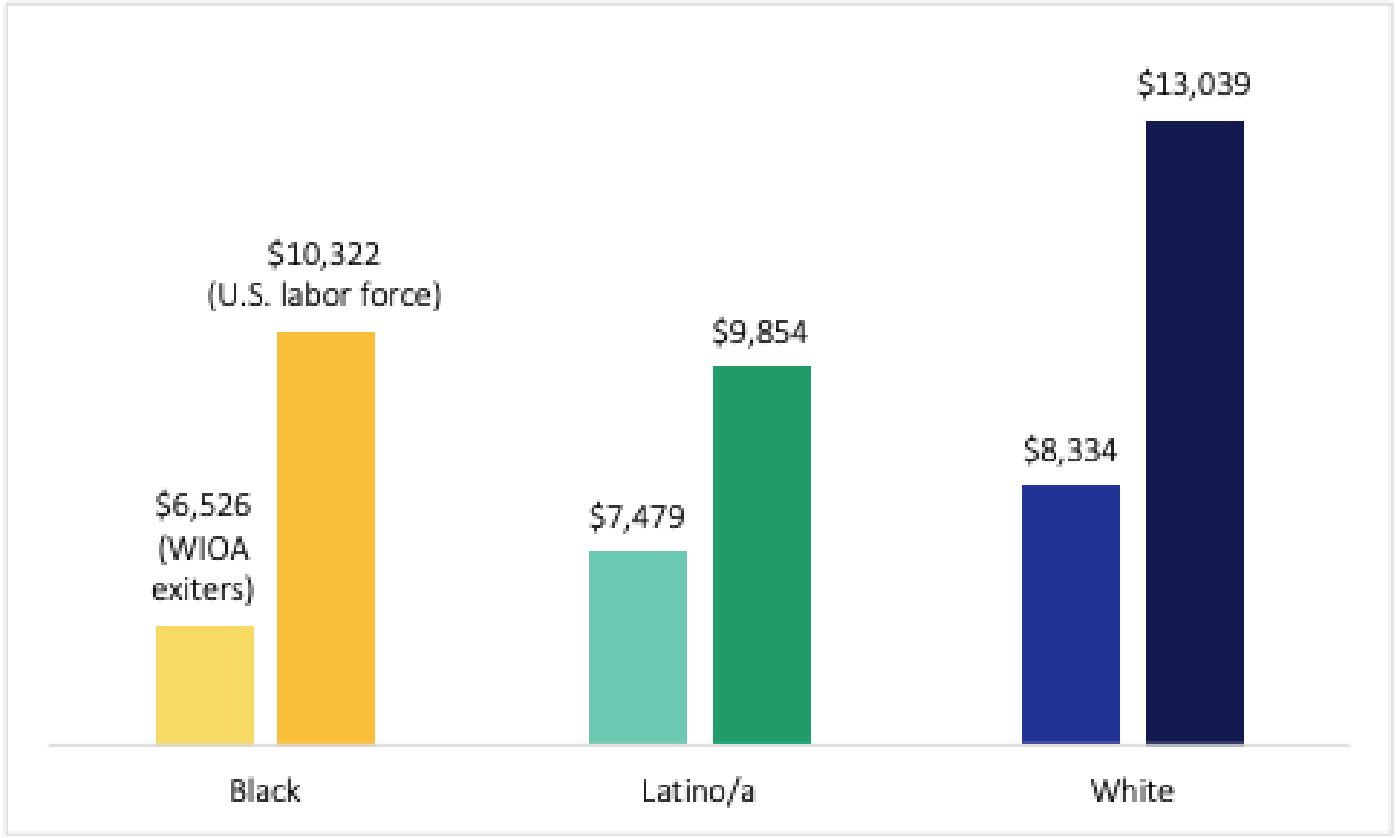
- More than one in three (35 percent) workers who completed WIOA-funded services between April 2019 and March 2020 was Black, despite making up just 12.6 percent of the country's labor force.9

Figure 1: Key characteristics of adult workers who received WIOA services from April 2019 to March 2020

Characteristics	All WIOA (%)	Black WIOA (%)
Unhoused	5	7
Formerly incarcerated	13	17
Low income	52	61
High school diploma or less	57	62
Receiving public assistance	28	34
Not attending school	92	92

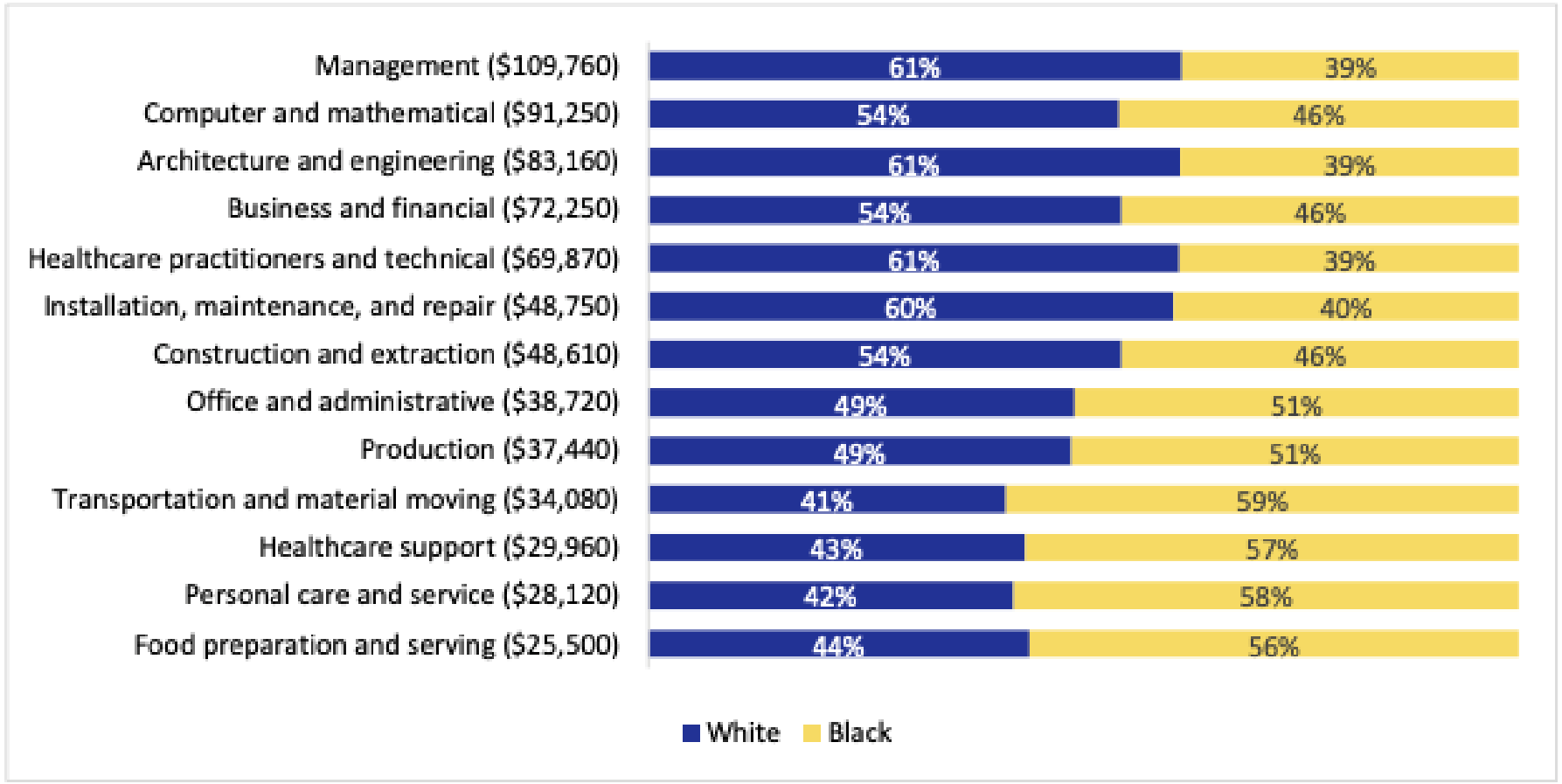
Note: The numbers are those leaving the program between April 2019 and March 2020. Source: Joint Center analysis of data in the "Program Year 2019 Data Book" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, 2019)

Figure 2: WIOA replicates racial earnings gaps seen across the labor force



Note: Dept. of Labor data in WIOA's performance reports only includes five racial-ethnic categories: Hispanic, non-Hispanic, White, Black, and "other."
Source: Joint Center analysis of outcomes by race-ethnicity of adults leaving WIOA from the U.S. Department of Labor, "Program Year 2019 Data Book" (Washington, D.C.: 2019), Table II-28; Joint Center analysis of data from the Current Population Survey, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020).

Figure 3: Black workers exiting WIOA-funded programs are less likely to be in higher-paying occupations than White workers



Note: The data only reflects the outcomes of White and Black workers who received WIOA services.
Source: Joint Center analysis of outcomes of dislocated workers by race and ethnicity in the U.S. Department of Labor, "Program Year 2019 Data Book" (Table III-31) (Washington, D.C.: 2019).

5 Principles

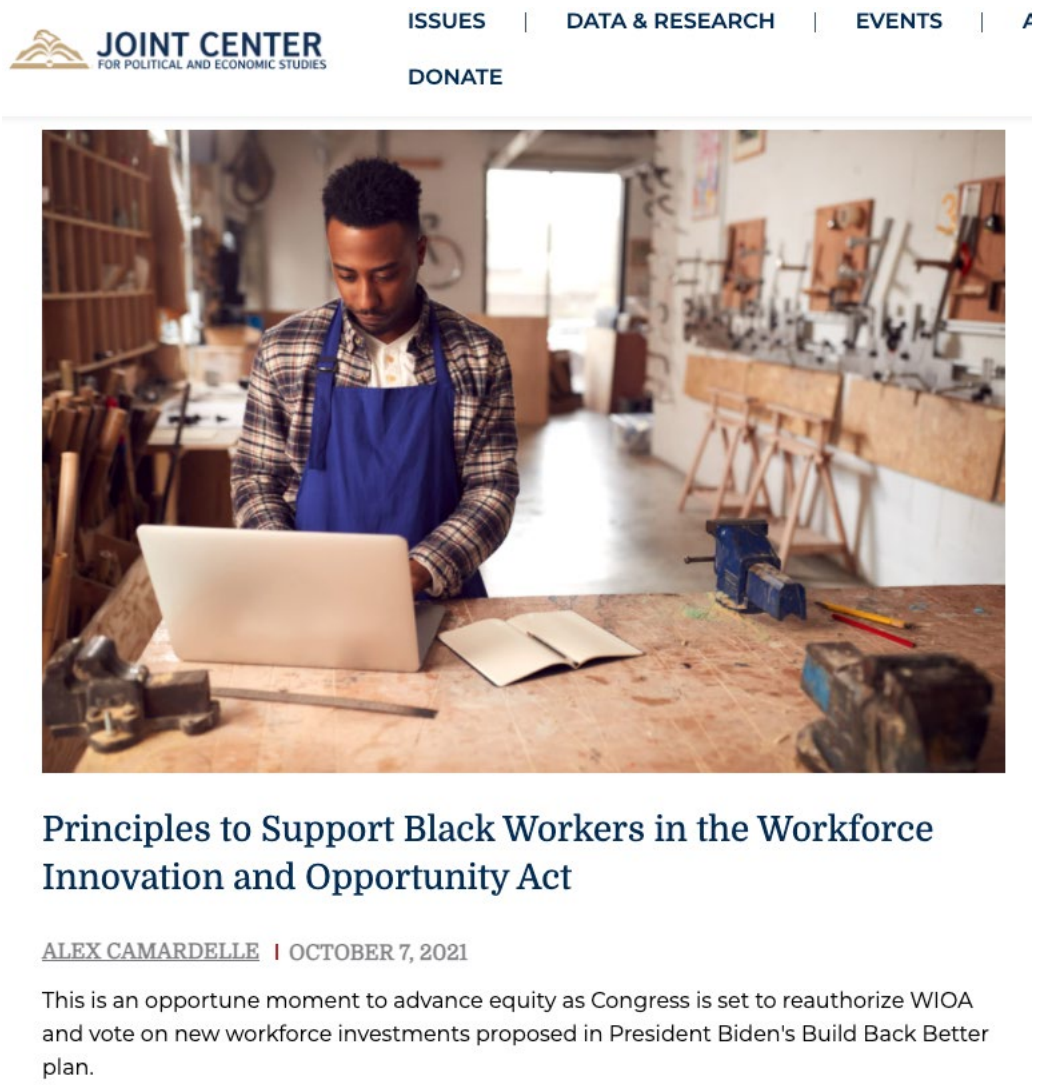
1.WIOA guardrails must be put in place to protect Black workers from occupational segregation.

2.WIOA must explicitly acknowledge discrimination in hiring and in the workplace.

3.WIOA must compensate Black workers shouldering the opportunity costs of training.

4.WIOA must invest in data systems that track program-level outcomes for Black workers.

5.Black job seekers must share power with workforce system decision-makers.



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