

What Future Feels Possible?



LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS

LGBTQ+ Youth and the Conditions for Career Readiness



Introduction

This landscape analysis examines how identity, systems, policy environments, and workplace conditions shape career pathways for LGBTQ+ youth. It draws together evidence from education, psychology, workforce development, counseling, public health, and policy research and reports to better understand the conditions under which LGBTQ+ youth engage in career readiness systems.

Britebound's approach to career readiness is organized around three interdependent components: Explore, the process through which young people develop self-knowledge, discover options, and begin imagining possible futures; Experiment, the hands-on experiences through which young people test those possibilities against reality; and Navigate, the capacity to move through systems, make informed decisions, and sustain forward momentum toward a chosen path. Together, these components map the full arc of what it means to become ready, not just for a first job, but for a life of purposeful choices.

For most youth, progress across all three components is shaped significantly by the adults around them: parents, counselors, teachers, mentors, and employers who open doors, offer guidance, and affirm possibility. This landscape analysis examines what happens when those conditions are uneven, contested, or absent, and why, for LGBTQ+ youth, career readiness is often shaped by a prior question that most career development frameworks do not account for: whether the environment feels safe enough to engage in the first place.



Why LGBTQ+ Youth

Among today's young people, the share identifying as LGBTQ+ is rising rapidly. The CDC's 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that **roughly one in four high school students identifies as non-heterosexual**¹, and the Williams Institute estimates there are approximately 2 million LGBTQ+ youth ages 13–17 in the U.S. alone². One in five Gen Z adults identify as LGBTQ+, a higher share than any previous generation on record³. Many LGBTQ+ youth report strong educational and career aspirations, yet they also anticipate discrimination in future workplaces⁴.



1 in 4 high school students identifies as non-heterosexual

Research consistently documents discrimination and exclusion across family, school, and workplace environments, with effects that extend into career development and long-term economic outcomes. LGBTQ+ adults report workplace discrimination at measurable rates, and LGBTQ+ households earn substantially less on average than non-LGBTQ+ households, with even larger disparities for transgender and nonbinary individuals⁵.

These conditions are also shaped by policy environments. Protections vary significantly across states and systems, while LGBTQ+ youth remain largely absent from workforce and career education policy infrastructure. They are not identified as a special population under Perkins V⁶, resulting in no mandated data collection, targeted supports, or accountability mechanisms within career readiness systems. The result is a generation of young people with strong career aspirations navigating a policy landscape that was not designed with them in mind.

These barriers are often studied separately across education, workforce, mental health, and policy research, even though LGBTQ+ youth experience them simultaneously. In addition, research on LGBTQ+ youth and career readiness remains fragmented and comparatively limited, particularly within Career and Technical Education, work-based learning, and workforce development systems. Much of the available evidence comes from adjacent fields, yet across this literature a consistent pattern emerges: LGBTQ+ youth navigate educational and career decisions under conditions shaped by anticipated discrimination, safety concerns, and unequal access to affirming environments. For many LGBTQ+ youth, career exploration is shaped not only by interest or ability, but by a more urgent question: what will happen if I pursue this? Across this evidence, a consistent implication also emerges: improving outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth in career readiness systems requires more than program-level adjustments. The structural conditions shaping policy, data infrastructure, practitioner preparation, and field capacity are where much of the leverage lies. This report examines how those systems, conditions, and institutional structures interact to shape career pathways over time.

“For many LGBTQ+ youth, career exploration is shaped not only by interest or ability, but by a more urgent question: what will happen if I pursue this?”



Who are LGBTQ+ Youth?

* Key Points *

- LGBTQ+ youth make up a growing share of the population entering education and workforce systems. 23% of Gen Z adults under 30 identify as LGBTQ+.
- LGBTQ+ youth are not a uniform group. Experiences differ across sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Many LGBTQ+ youth manage safety and visibility challenges across school, family, and workplace settings.
- LGBTQ+ youth career readiness is shaped by identity, safety, belonging, and visibility across systems.

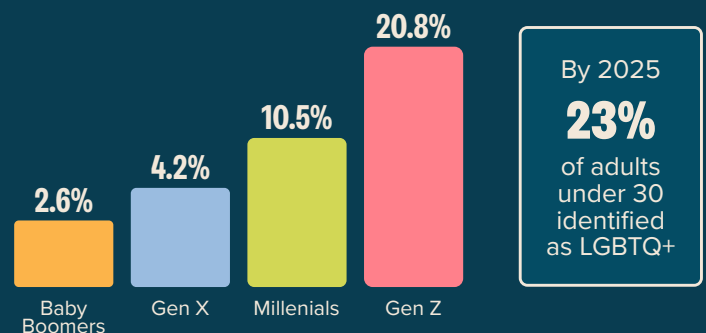
Terminology

The terminology used to describe LGBTQ+ communities is not fixed. It varies across generations, geographies, and cultural contexts, and the list of identity labels young people use continues to expand⁷.

In this landscape analysis, “LGBTQ+” is used as an inclusive umbrella term encompassing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, gender non-conforming, nonbinary, and other identities outside heterosexual and cisgender categories.⁸ Where research distinguishes between sexual orientation versus gender identity, that distinction is maintained. “LGBQ+” refers to sexual orientation minorities, while “transgender and gender-expansive” refers to gender identity minorities. This distinction is analytically important because transgender and nonbinary youth consistently face more severe barriers than their cisgender LGBQ+ peers, and combining these groups can obscure those differences.

Population and generational trends

LGBTQ+ youth make up a growing share of the population entering education and workforce systems. LGBTQ+ identification has increased steadily across generations, with each younger cohort identifying at higher rates than the one before it. As of 2022, 20.8% of Gen Z adults identified as LGBTQ+, compared to 10.5% of Millennials, 4.2% of Gen X, and 2.6% of Baby Boomers.⁹ By 2025, that figure had risen to 23% among adults under 30, continuing an upward trend. Gallup projects that the overall proportion of LGBTQ+ Americans will exceed 10% as younger generations make up a larger share of the adult population.¹⁰ Career readiness systems, schools, and employers are serving a population changing more rapidly than the systems designed to support it.



Identity diversity within the LGBTQ+ population

LGBTQ+ youth are not a uniform population. The range of identities within the umbrella is broader and more varied than in previous generations, and this variation shapes experiences, barriers, and needs in ways that uniform approaches are unlikely to address.

Among LGBTQ+ youth surveyed by HRC in 2023, the most common sexual orientation identities were gay or lesbian and bisexual or biromantic, followed by pansexual, asexual, and queer. Among Gen Z adults who identify as LGBTQ+, bisexual is the most common identity overall, and LGBTQ+ identification is especially high among Gen Z women.¹¹

Gender diversity among youth has also increased significantly. In HRC's 2023 survey, 69.5% of LGBTQ+ youth identified as at least one non-cisgender identity, and nonbinary identification more than doubled between 2017 and 2023.¹² Transgender identity is also concentrated among younger cohorts, with 76% of transgender individuals under age 35.¹³

Identity development and disclosure

Identity development begins during the same period that educational aspirations and early career thinking begin to form. Many LGBTQ+ youth begin recognizing aspects of their identity during early adolescence, often years before they fully disclose it to others. On average, LGBTQ+ youth first recognize they are not heterosexual around age 11, while transgender youth recognize they are not cisgender around age 12. Disclosure typically follows later and varies across relationships and environments.¹⁴

Disclosure is uneven across environments and shaped by perceived safety. Thirty-one percent of LGBTQ+ youth have not disclosed their sexual orientation to any parent or guardian, and LGBTQ+ youth are least likely to be out in settings such as athletics and religious communities.¹⁵ This gap between internal recognition and external disclosure indicates that many youth navigate identity development with limited adult support during formative years.

Peer relationships often become primary sources of affirmation and belonging. Nearly all LGBTQ+ youth report disclosing their identity to at least one friend, suggesting that trust and support are often experienced first through peer networks rather than institutions or family systems.¹⁶

Together, these patterns help explain why LGBTQ+ career readiness differs from traditional models of career development. LGBTQ+ youth are navigating education and workforce systems while simultaneously managing identity, safety, disclosure, and belonging. These conditions shape not only how young people experience school and work, but also what futures feel possible to pursue.



The Challenges LGBTQ+ Youth Carry into Career Readiness

* Key Points *

- LGBTQ+ youth face discrimination across family, school, and workplace environments.
- These experiences shape educational engagement, mental health, and career readiness. Nearly 70% of LGBTQ+ youth report feeling persistently sad or hopeless.
- School climate and belonging affect academic persistence and postsecondary aspirations. One-third of LGBTQ+ students missed school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.
- Workplace discrimination begins before employment and continues across hiring, disclosure, and retention. Nearly 70% of LGBTQ+ youth anticipate discrimination in future careers.
- Mental health is a key mechanism through which these barriers affect career development.

The challenges LGBTQ+ youth face are not random or isolated. They follow a pattern described by minority stress theory. Meyer (2003)¹⁷ established that stigma, prejudice, and discrimination create a hostile social environment that contributes to adverse mental health outcomes among stigmatized groups. This stress is additive, layered on top of the pressures all young people face, and chronic, rooted in enduring social and cultural structures rather than isolated incidents.

These barriers are often discussed separately across education, family, workplace, and mental health research, even though LGBTQ+ youth experience them simultaneously. This section traces how these patterns unfold across family, school, and early work experiences, and how they accumulate over time into career readiness challenges.



Family: The First Environment

Family environments shape identity development, self-worth, and early perceptions of future possibility.

Family is often the first environment in which LGBTQ+ youth encounter affirmation or rejection of their identity. These experiences shape identity development and emotional wellbeing in ways that extend into education and career outcomes.

Family acceptance and disclosure

Family support and rejection often coexist within the same household. More than 6 in 10 (63.1%) LGBTQ+ youth report experiencing some form of parental support, while over half (57.4%) report at least one form of parental rejection. Research argues that acceptance and rejection are not opposite ends of a single continuum, but experiences that frequently coexist and send mixed or contradictory messages to LGBTQ+ youth.¹⁸ Many young people navigate this complexity through partial disclosure: 80.1% of LGBTQ+ youth are out to at least one immediate family member, but only 43.9% of transgender and gender-expansive youth are out to all parents or guardians. In addition, 31% of LGBTQ+ youth have not disclosed their sexual orientation to any parent. These patterns suggest that disclosure is often selective and shaped by perceived risk within the family environment.¹⁹

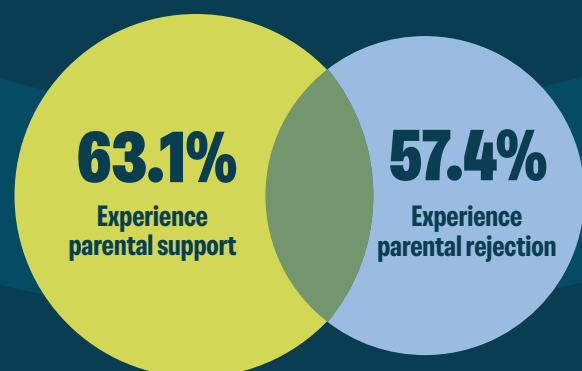
Parents as career guides

Research by Britebound (2025) underscores how central parents are to career planning for young people broadly. More than nine in ten teens report discussing post-high school plans with their parents, and parental influence increases as students approach graduation. For many young people, parents are not simply one source of guidance among many. They are the primary influence shaping educational and career decision-making.²⁰ Research on educational and career pathways similarly finds that when family-based guidance and social capital are limited, institutional agents such as teachers, counselors, and mentors become increasingly important sources of support, navigation, and opportunity.²¹

For LGBTQ+ youth, the family patterns documented above create a structural gap that is rarely discussed in career readiness terms. The adult most likely to shape a young person's career thinking may also be the adult to whom many LGBTQ+ youth have not disclosed their identity, or whose response to that identity has been partial, conditional, or rejecting.²² For transgender and gender-expansive youth, whose rates of full parental disclosure are substantially lower than their cisgender LGBTQ+ peers, this gap may be even wider.²³

This is not only a family support issue, but also a career readiness issue. When parental guidance is unavailable or misaligned with a young person's identity and aspirations, teachers, counselors, mentors, and career-connected learning systems often become primary sources of guidance and navigation instead. Research consistently identifies affirming adults and supportive school relationships as important protective factors associated with stronger educational engagement, belonging, and wellbeing for LGBTQ+ youth.²⁴ For LGBTQ+ youth, the quality and inclusiveness of those systems therefore matters significantly more.

Acceptance and rejection often coexist



The consequences of low family support

Limited family support affects educational, mental health, and career trajectories. Low family support is associated with depression, psychological distress, substance use, suicidal ideation, school dropout, and housing instability.²⁵ These outcomes reflect minority stress operating within the family context, where rejection contributes to sustained psychological strain.²⁶ Over time, these effects accumulate. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals are approximately 2.5 times more likely than heterosexual peers to experience a mental disorder at some point in their lifetime.²⁷

Transgender and gender-expansive youth often face more severe forms of family rejection and invisibility. For example, 65.5% of transgender and gender-expansive youth whose families never use correct pronouns screened positive for depression, compared to 49.6% of those whose families always use correct pronouns. Transgender and gender-expansive youth are also less likely to be fully out across family relationships, meaning many navigate identity development with limited support within the home environment.²⁸

From family rejection to housing instability

Family rejection can directly disrupt educational and career participation. Family conflict related to LGBTQ+ identity is a leading contributor to housing instability and homelessness. Fifty-five percent of youth who ran away report mistreatment or fear related to their identity as a contributing cause. Overall, 28% of LGBTQ+ youth report experiencing homelessness or housing instability, and 40% of youth experiencing homelessness identify as LGBTQ+ despite representing a much smaller share of the overall youth population.²⁹ Housing instability directly constrains career readiness. Without stable

housing, young people face barriers to maintaining employment, participating in training programs, and building the relationships and networks that support career development.

Addressing these barriers requires more than housing alone. Social support, particularly from family or family-like networks, is one of the strongest protective factors against psychological distress for LGBTQ+ youth.³⁰ Wraparound models combining housing, mental health services, case management, and affirming care are increasingly recommended, yet many LGBTQ+ youth experiencing housing instability still cannot access needed mental health care due to cost, transportation, and lack of affirming providers. Rigorous evaluations of these models remain limited.

28% of LGBTQ+ youth report homelessness or housing instability

40% of youth experiencing homelessness identify as LGBTQ+



School: Where Aspirations are Shaped

School climate shapes not only wellbeing, but educational engagement and future aspirations.

School environments influence whether LGBTQ+ youth can build the academic foundation, sense of belonging, and confidence required to pursue postsecondary pathways and careers.

Safety and climate

Many LGBTQ+ students experience school as an environment where safety and visibility must be actively managed. Most LGBTQ+ students report experiencing some form of harassment or mistreatment at school in the prior year, and nearly half feel unsafe in at least one school setting.³¹ A third of LGBTQ+ students missed at least one full day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.³²



1/3

of LGBTQ+ students missed school in the past month because they felt uncomfortable

Many students also report regular exposure to homophobic language at school with limited teacher intervention.³³ Harassment extends beyond verbal incidents to physical harassment and assault, including hostile behavior from faculty and staff.³⁴ These experiences are cumulative and shape how LGBTQ+ students engage with school on a daily basis.

From school climate to student outcomes

Unsafe school environments directly affect academic engagement and persistence. LGBTQ+ students who experience discrimination at school report lower GPAs, higher rates of absenteeism, increased likelihood of school discipline, and a diminished sense of belonging compared to peers who do not experience discrimination.³⁵

Mental health is a key mechanism in this relationship. Among LGBTQ+ youth who do not complete high school, the most commonly cited reason is health-related, particularly depression and anxiety, followed by safety concerns.³⁶ These patterns indicate that barriers to persistence are closely tied to school climate and student wellbeing, rather than academic ability alone.

Transgender youth experience these effects at higher rates. They are less likely than their cisgender peers to pursue higher education and report lower grades on average,³⁷ reflecting the compounded effects of school climate and structural exclusion.

Curriculum and resource access

Representation shapes what future students perceive as possible. For many LGBTQ+ youth, their identities, histories, and potential futures are largely absent from the curriculum. Nationally, only 19.4% of LGBTQ+ students report being taught positive representations of LGBTQ+ people, history, or contributions in school.³⁸

Student-led organizations such as Gender and Sexuality Alliances provide important sources of support and visibility, though many students still do not feel safe enough to participate.³⁹ The absence of representation extends directly into career readiness.



When students do not encounter LGBTQ+ people in curriculum, professional role models, or career pathways, the futures they can imagine for themselves narrow before formal career advising even begins.⁴⁰

Aspirations, access, and the postsecondary pipeline

School climate and representation shape not only academic outcomes, but whether postsecondary pathways feel realistically attainable in the first place. For many LGBTQ+ youth, concerns about safety, belonging, and discrimination continue into the transition to higher education. Twenty-nine percent report concern that their identity will negatively affect higher education opportunities, and transgender boys report lower college aspirations than cisgender peers.⁴¹ These concerns are reinforced by structural barriers throughout the transition process itself, including school counseling, college applications, and campus systems organized around binary gender norms. Rather than a single point of exclusion, LGBTQ+ youth often encounter multiple points of friction across the pathway to higher education. Over time, these experiences can narrow educational aspirations and shape what futures feel possible to pursue.

The Transition to Work: Documented Challenges in Early Careers

Workplace experiences often extend earlier patterns of visibility management, exclusion, and discrimination. As LGBTQ+ youth enter the workforce, they encounter both the continuation of earlier barriers and new challenges specific to workplace environments.

What young people report anticipating

Many LGBTQ+ youth approach work with both aspiration and concern. Many aspire to careers that allow them to express their identities and contribute

meaningfully, while also anticipating barriers related to their LGBTQ+ identity. Survey data indicates that 69.2% expect discrimination in their future careers, and over 40% believe their identity may negatively affect their long-term career opportunities.⁴² At the same time, some youth expect inclusive or supportive workplace environments, reflecting variation across industries and employers.⁴³ Taken together, these responses indicate that LGBTQ+ youth enter the workforce with mixed expectations shaped by both aspiration and concern.

Discrimination in hiring

Discrimination often begins before employment itself. For LGBTQ+ applicants, decisions about identity disclosure on resumes and applications can be consequential. Among LGBTQ+ youth with workforce experience, 39% identified the hiring process itself as a source of discrimination.⁴⁴ Experimental studies using matched resumes have also found evidence of discrimination against gay and bisexual men and queer women compared to equally qualified heterosexual applicants, including in cities typically considered LGBTQ+ friendly.⁴⁵

The disclosure dilemma

Many LGBTQ+ workers continue managing visibility after entering the workforce. Research indicates that fear of negative consequences associated with disclosure can affect career attitudes, promotions, and stress levels.⁴⁶ Up to one-third of LGBTQ+ workers report not disclosing their identity to anyone at work, and nearly half of LGBTQ+ adults report being less out in at least one area of their lives over the past year, including at work.⁴⁷

Workplace discrimination and its consequences

Workplace discrimination affects both day-to-day wellbeing and long-term career trajectories. Approximately one-third of LGBTQ+ employees report



experiencing employment discrimination, including being fired, not hired, or not promoted because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and a similar share report having left a job because of how they were treated.⁴⁸ In addition, half of LGBTQ+ adults report experiencing some form of discrimination or harassment in the past year alone, including adverse employment actions and verbal, physical, or sexual harassment.⁴⁹

Discrimination is not limited to formal employment actions. Many LGBTQ+ workers report hostile workplace climates involving negative comments, slurs, and inappropriate jokes, and 52% say discrimination has negatively affected their mental wellbeing.⁵⁰ These experiences shape not only whether workers remain in specific jobs, but how safe and sustainable workplaces feel over time.

Research documents longer-term patterns of career adjustment among LGBTQ+ workers, including transitions toward more affirming workplaces, exits from roles associated with burnout, and shifts away from certain career pathways. LGBTQ+ workers are also more likely to cluster in environments perceived as more inclusive. These are patterns that may reflect responses to workplace climate rather than preference alone.⁵¹

Mental Health: How Discrimination Accumulates Across Settings

Mental health is not a separate issue. It is the mechanism through which discrimination across family, school, and early work experiences accumulates and shapes a young person's ability to plan for the future. When this exposure is chronic, it undermines self-concept, emotional stability, and the capacity for career development.

LGBTQ+ youth are nearly **twice as likely** to feel persistently sad or hopeless

LGBTQ+ youth



Heterosexual youth



vs.

The scale of the burden

Mental health disparities among LGBTQ+ youth are severe and consistent across data sources.

Nearly 70% of LGBTQ+ youth report feeling persistently sad or hopeless, compared to 35% of heterosexual youth.⁵² More than half screen positive for depression, and nearly two thirds for anxiety.⁵³ These patterns extend beyond general distress to more acute mental health risks. Sexually diverse adolescents have 5.4 times the odds of high depressive symptoms and 3.5 times the odds of lifetime suicide attempts compared to their heterosexual peers.⁵⁴ Rates of self-injury and suicidality are at least three times as high for queer-spectrum students.⁵⁵

These disparities reflect chronic exposure to stigma and discrimination rather than individual vulnerability. Minority stress theory describes how external stressors, anticipatory vigilance, and internalized stigma reinforce one another across settings.⁵⁶ LGBTQ+ youth are not simply dealing with more stress than their peers. They are dealing with a form of stress that is chronic, socially produced, and resistant to individual coping.



LGBTQ+ Identity and Career Pathways

* Key Points *

- LGBTQ+ youth often make career decisions under conditions shaped by anticipated discrimination and exclusion. Nearly 70% expect discrimination in future careers.
- Safety concerns can narrow career pathways before workforce entry begins.
- Career readiness systems rarely account for LGBTQ+ identity development, workplace navigation, or disclosure decisions, and no comprehensive national data track LGBTQ+ participation in career pathways.
- Biased guidance systems and structural exclusion can reinforce constrained career pathways over time.
- These patterns accumulate into measurable economic disparities across a lifetime. LGBTQ+ workers earn about 90 cents for every dollar earned by the typical U.S. worker, with larger gaps for transgender workers.

Career pathways begin long before a first job application, in how young people decide what futures feel possible and safe. For LGBTQ+ youth, these decisions are shaped not only by interest and ability, but also by safety, belonging, and the risk of discrimination. Research on LGBTQ+ career readiness remains limited, but evidence across career psychology, workforce discrimination, and counseling points to a consistent pattern in how LGBTQ+ identity may shape career pathways over time.

How LGBTQ+ Identity Shapes Career Decision-Making

Career exploration is shaped not only by interest, but by perceived safety and belonging. For most youth, career exploration is organized around capability and interest. For LGBTQ+ youth, it is organized around a

more urgent question: what will happen if I pursue this? Research shows that the defining question for career decision-making is often not "Can I do it?" or "Will I like it?" but "What will happen if I do?"⁵⁷ Youth may avoid careers they are interested in because they anticipate discrimination or unsafe environments. Decisions are shaped by perceived safety and acceptance, not just fit or potential.⁵⁸

Identity development and career development occur simultaneously for many LGBTQ+ youth.

While their peers are focusing primarily on career interests, many LGBTQ+ youth are also working to understand and accept their identity.⁵⁹ These tasks reinforce one another. When identity is still forming, career planning is often delayed or constrained, contributing to higher levels of indecision and a less direct path into career exploration.⁶⁰



How Options Narrow: Occupational Circumscription and Stereotyping

Career pathways often narrow before formal advising even begins. When career decisions are shaped by anticipated discrimination and exclusion, the range of options students consider can begin narrowing long before formal career advising starts. Over time, this produces a pattern of occupational circumscription, in which LGBTQ+ students eliminate viable career options before they are ever fully explored.

Students may perceive that certain careers are unsafe, unwelcoming, or incompatible with their identity, leading them to remove those options from consideration.⁶¹ This narrowing reflects repeated exposure to social cues about where LGBTQ+ people are accepted and where they are not. In this context, stereotyped career pathways can begin to feel like the only viable options. For example, gay men are often steered toward artistic or expressive fields, while lesbian women are pushed toward traditionally masculine occupations. Other fields may be perceived as entirely off-limits, especially in highly gendered environments.⁶²

This process does not end at workforce entry. LGBTQ+ individuals continue adjusting their careers in response to discrimination throughout adulthood, moving toward more affirming environments, leaving identity-congruent roles due to burnout, or scaling back professional ambitions entirely.⁶³ Over time, these repeated adjustments narrow the pathways LGBTQ+ individuals perceive as realistically available to them.

How Systems Reinforce These Constraints

These constraints are reinforced through the design of career readiness systems themselves. LGBTQ+ students encounter systems that often fail to account for their experiences at every level, from the broad frameworks defining career readiness to the specific pathways through which young people access training and opportunity.⁶⁴

At the framework level, the gap is fundamental.

Traditional career readiness frameworks do not account for the identity development processes that shape LGBTQ+ students' career decision-making, nor do they prepare youth to navigate workplace discrimination, assess employer inclusivity, or make decisions about identity disclosure.⁶⁵

Within CTE specifically, the exclusion is structural.

LGBTQ+ youth are not designated as a special population under Perkins V, meaning there are no mandated requirements for data collection, targeted supports, or accountability mechanisms.⁶⁶ No comprehensive national data exist on LGBTQ+ students' participation in career pathways, credential attainment, or work-based learning experiences. The absence of data limits visibility, weakens accountability, and makes targeted improvement difficult.

Program design can also compound exclusion. Many CTE programs have historically organized students along binary gender lines, creating additional pressure for LGBTQ+ youth to conform to categories that may not reflect their identities. This is not simply a climate issue. It is a structural feature of program design layered on top of broader policy and data gaps.⁶⁷



Together, these system-level gaps reinforce the same safety-driven constraints shaping LGBTQ+ students' earlier career decisions. The systems designed to expand opportunity are, in practice, contributing to its narrowing.

“No comprehensive national data exist on LGBTQ+ students' participation in career pathways, credential attainment, or work-based learning experiences.”

Biased Career Guidance and Assessment Tools

Guidance systems can unintentionally reproduce the same constraints students are already navigating.

Even when students seek guidance within these systems, the tools and frameworks available to them often reproduce the same limitations.

Common assessment tools including the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and the Self-Directed Search were designed for and normed on general populations, and there is little evidence that LGBTQ+ youth were considered in their development.⁶⁸ As a result, they may reflect heteronormative assumptions about career interests and identity that do not fully apply to this population. In practice, results are often interpreted through a heterosexist lens unless a student has disclosed their identity, and even when disclosure occurs, comparisons to normative data may be unreliable because LGBTQ+ individuals are underrepresented in norming samples. More broadly, standard career assessments were not designed to

capture the factors shaping career decision-making for LGBTQ+ students, including concerns about safety, identity disclosure, and workplace discrimination.⁶⁹

The guidance itself is further limited by gaps in counselor training and research. Career guidance is often delivered while many LGBTQ+ students are still navigating identity formation, making standard approaches poorly aligned with what these students need. At the same time, counselors are often working without an adequate evidence base to guide practice.⁷⁰ Unexamined assumptions about sexual orientation and gender identity can shape how assessments are interpreted and how options are presented, sometimes narrowing rather than expanding what students believe is possible for themselves.⁷¹ The American School Counselor Association's ethical standards require counselors to develop competence in working with diverse populations including LGBTQ+ students,⁷² yet training in affirming practice remains inconsistent across counselor education programs.⁷³

Together, biased tools and underprepared guidance systems can produce career support that not only fails to address LGBTQ+ students' needs but may also reinforce the constrained choices they have already begun making on their own. Rather than disrupting safety-driven decision-making, career guidance systems often reproduce it.

The Economic Outcome: What Exclusion Costs Across a Lifetime

The cumulative effects of constrained pathways become economically visible over time. The mechanisms documented in this section, including constrained decisions, narrowed options, system-level exclusion, and misdirected guidance, do not stay abstract. They accumulate into measurable economic outcomes across a lifetime.



On average, LGBTQ+ workers earn about 90 cents for every dollar earned by the typical U.S. worker.

Transgender women earn closer to 60 cents per dollar, while transgender men and nonbinary workers earn around 70 cents.⁷⁴ LGBTQ+ households lose an estimated \$12,600 per year compared to non-LGBTQ+ households, and transgender and nonbinary households lose approximately \$24,800 per year.⁷⁵ These disparities compound at intersections of race and identity: LGBTQ+ households of color lose approximately \$22,590 per year compared to non-LGBTQ+ white households, nearly double the overall gap. LGBTQ+ individuals are more likely than non-

LGBTQ+ individuals to report household incomes below \$25,000, with even higher rates among LGBTQ+ people of color and transgender individuals.⁷⁶

These disparities are not the result of individual choices alone. They reflect the cumulative effects of constrained decisions, system-level exclusion, and unequal conditions over time. Career readiness for LGBTQ+ youth therefore depends not only on access to opportunity, but on whether career systems recognize and respond to the conditions under which these youth are making decisions.

**On average,
LGBTQ+ workers
earn about 90
cents for every
dollar earned
by the typical
U.S. worker**

Typical U.S. Worker

\$1.00

LGBTQ+ Worker

\$0.90

10¢ less



The Policy Environment Shaping LGBTQ+ Career Readiness

* Key Points *

- Policy shapes whether LGBTQ+ youth can safely access schools, career pathways, and workplaces.
- Federal protections and guidance related to LGBTQ+ inclusion have become increasingly unstable since 2025.
- LGBTQ+ youth remain largely absent from workforce and career education policy infrastructure, including Perkins V and WIOA.
- State policy environments increasingly shape whether LGBTQ+ youth experience school and career systems as safe or affirming.
- Workplace climate and employer DEI rollbacks reinforce many of the same safety calculations shaping earlier career decision-making.

As of 2025 and 2026, the policy environment surrounding LGBTQ+ youth has become increasingly unstable and uneven across federal, state, and workplace contexts. These shifts directly affect the conditions under which LGBTQ+ youth engage in education, career development, and employment. Policy does not operate separately from career readiness systems. It shapes the conditions under which those systems function.

Federal Rollbacks and Policy Instability

Federal protections related to LGBTQ+ inclusion have become increasingly unstable since 2025.

Executive actions and agency guidance have shifted away from LGBTQ+-inclusive interpretations of civil

rights protections in education and employment. Federal protections related to gender identity in schools have become less stable following the rollback of recent Title IX guidance, while agencies overseeing employment protections have reduced or rescinded guidance related to workplace harassment and inclusion for LGBTQ+ workers, particularly transgender individuals.⁷⁷ These changes matter because policy signals shape institutional behavior. As protections become less explicit or less consistently enforced, schools, workforce programs, and employers face greater uncertainty about inclusive practice, and LGBTQ+ youth face greater uncertainty about whether educational and workplace environments will be safe or affirming.



The weakening of federal data infrastructure also limits visibility into LGBTQ+ workforce outcomes.

Sexual orientation and gender identity measures have been removed from major federal education and workforce data systems, limiting the ability to track disparities or evaluate outcomes over time.⁷⁸ The absence of data is not neutral. It reduces visibility, weakens accountability, and limits the ability to identify where support is most needed.

Despite these shifts, some federal protections remain. *Bostock v. Clayton County* (2020) continues to establish that Title VII protections against sex discrimination in employment apply to sexual orientation and gender identity.⁷⁹ Federal workforce laws such as Perkins V and WIOA also still provide mechanisms states and localities can use to support vulnerable youth populations, even though LGBTQ+ youth are not explicitly named within them.⁸⁰

Structural Gaps in Workforce and Career Policy

Structural gaps in workforce policy existed even before recent rollbacks. Federal workforce and career education policy has long failed to fully include LGBTQ+ youth within the systems designed to support career development.

Perkins V, the primary federal law governing Career and Technical Education, does not identify LGBTQ+ youth as a special population and contains no requirements for sexual orientation or gender identity data collection. WIOA similarly contains no LGBTQ+-specific provisions within youth workforce programs. Federal workforce programs including Job Corps, YouthBuild, and AmeriCorps lack published LGBTQ+ inclusion data, explicit recruitment strategies, or formal partnerships with LGBTQ+ organizations. As a result, there are no mandated accountability mechanisms,

targeted support requirements, or data systems capable of tracking LGBTQ+ participation and outcomes within career pathways.⁸¹

These omissions have practical consequences. Without data, disparities remain difficult to identify and address. Without explicit inclusion requirements, implementation depends heavily on local interpretation and political climate. Career readiness systems therefore operate as though LGBTQ+ identity has little relevance to career development, despite evidence throughout this report showing otherwise.

Traditional career readiness frameworks also fail to account for the specific factors shaping LGBTQ+ career decision-making, including identity disclosure, workplace discrimination, and safety considerations.⁸² These are not peripheral concerns. They are central to how many LGBTQ+ youth navigate education and employment systems.

State Policy Divergence and Its Consequences for Career Readiness

While federal policy has become less stable, state-level conditions have become increasingly uneven. The Movement Advancement Project's tracking of LGBTQ+-related laws and policies reveals a divergent country, with some states expanding protections while others increasingly restrict them.

In 2025 alone, at least 22 states and Puerto Rico saw only anti-LGBTQ+ policy developments, while 14 states saw only pro-LGBTQ+ developments, a pattern MAP describes as “two very different Americas” for LGBTQ+ people.⁸³ This divergence is reflected in where people live: roughly 40% of LGBTQ+ people ages 13 and older reside in states with high overall policy scores, while another 34% live in states with negative scores, creating a deeply bifurcated landscape with relatively little middle ground.



These differences represent more than legal distinctions. They shape the everyday conditions under which LGBTQ+ youth navigate school and career systems. Policies governing curriculum content, facilities access, pronoun use, and identity disclosure influence whether educational institutions are experienced as safe, affirming, or hostile.⁸⁴ Policies governing curriculum content, facilities access, pronoun use, and identity disclosure determine the baseline conditions under which young people attend school, engage with teachers and counselors, and participate in career-connected learning. Students in schools with comprehensive protective policies are more likely to feel a sense of belonging, skip fewer days due to safety concerns, and report less LGBTQ+-based harassment than those in schools with partial or no such policies.⁸⁵

No state-level data currently exists on LGBTQ+ participation in career-connected learning specifically, a gap that is itself a consequence of the structural absences described earlier in this report. Yet the broader evidence is consistent: unsupportive school climates reduce LGBTQ+ students' sense of belonging, limit their willingness to engage openly, and narrow the range of futures they feel safe imagining for themselves.⁸⁶ For many LGBTQ+ youth, career exploration is shaped not only by what they want, but by ongoing calculations about safety, disclosure, and anticipated treatment within the environments they would need to enter to pursue it. Increasingly, where a young person grows up shapes not only whether they feel safe at school, but which futures feel possible to pursue.

“LGBTQ+ employees are feeling the impact of reduction in DEI practices across organizations.”

Workplace Climate and Employer Rollbacks

Workplace climate reinforces many of the same safety calculations shaping earlier career decision-making. Policy shifts extend beyond schools and workforce systems into the employer environments LGBTQ+ youth are preparing to enter.

Beginning in 2025, many organizations reduced, rebranded, or scaled back diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in response to political pressure and changing federal guidance. Nearly 40% of U.S. workers report that their employer reduced, rebranded, or eliminated at least one DEI-related practice in the past year.⁸⁷

These changes influence workplace climate in measurable ways. Workers in organizations that reduced DEI practices report substantially higher levels of stigma and bias compared to workers in organizations that maintained inclusive practices (54.2% versus 24.9%). In response, LGBTQ+ employees often reduce visibility, disengage socially, or limit participation as forms of self-protection. Nearly half of LGBTQ+ adults report being less out in at least one area of their lives over the past year, including at work.⁸⁸

For LGBTQ+ youth entering the workforce, these conditions reinforce the same safety calculations already shaping career decision-making earlier in life. Career-connected learning and work-based learning programs cannot assume that workplaces are experienced as neutral environments. Perceived safety and belonging remain central factors shaping participation and retention.



Implications

Policy environments shape not only access to opportunity, but access to safety while pursuing it. The policy environment LGBTQ+ youth are navigating is not simply politically polarized. It is structurally uneven. Protections, supports, and expectations vary dramatically across states, schools, workforce systems, and employers.

LGBTQ+ youth are attempting to navigate career pathways within systems whose conditions shift depending on geography, institution, and political

climate. The issue is not only unequal access to opportunity. It is unequal access to safety while pursuing it.

For career readiness organizations, this has direct implications for program design, employer partnerships, student support, and advocacy. Career-connected learning cannot be separated from the policy environments shaping whether LGBTQ+ youth feel safe enough to participate, persist, and envision a future within these systems.



What Effective LGBTQ+ Career Readiness Requires

* Key Points *

- Effective LGBTQ+ career readiness requires environments that integrate identity, reduce risk, and reinforce safety and belonging.
- Affirming adults, inclusive environments, and peer support are associated with stronger educational and mental health outcomes.
- Structural inclusion within career pathways matters; neutral system design does not produce equitable outcomes.
- Mental health, housing stability, and family support function as career readiness conditions, not separate issues.

Research also points to conditions that support LGBTQ+ youth engagement in career development, particularly when programs integrate identity, reduce risk, and reinforce safety and belonging. These practices are not a comprehensive solution set. They reflect foundational conditions identified within a still-limited evidence base, especially in CTE, workforce development, and work-based learning contexts.

Identity-Integrated Career Development

Career development and identity development are deeply interconnected for LGBTQ+ youth. Traditional career counseling was not designed with LGBTQ+ youth in mind, yet research consistently shows that identity development and career planning cannot be treated as separate processes for this population.⁸⁹ For many LGBTQ+ youth, career exploration occurs

at the same time they are working to understand and accept their identity. As a result, identity-related concerns, including safety, disclosure, discrimination, and belonging, directly shape career decision-making. Students who are still navigating identity acceptance may struggle to fully engage in career planning, making identity support a prerequisite rather than a separate concern.⁹⁰

Effective career counseling integrates identity and career development rather than treating LGBTQ+ identity as peripheral. Counselors need to help students assess workplace climate, navigate disclosure decisions, and build confidence in responding to potential discrimination. LGBTQ+ role models and professional networks can also expand what students perceive as possible, particularly in fields they may have previously ruled out because of anticipated exclusion.⁹¹



Safety and Belonging as Preconditions for Participation

Career readiness begins with whether environments feel safe enough to participate in.

Research consistently identifies affirming adults, inclusive school climates, peer support, and visible inclusion as key protective factors for LGBTQ+ youth outcomes.⁹² Students who perceive teachers and staff as supportive show higher levels of educational aspiration and school engagement.⁹³

Inclusive environments also produce measurable academic and mental health benefits. Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) are associated with stronger school belonging, increased safety, improved academic outcomes, and lower levels of psychological distress. Inclusive curriculum similarly improves perceptions of safety and belonging, not only for LGBTQ+ students but across the broader student population.⁹⁴

For career readiness organizations, safety and belonging cannot be treated as secondary concerns. They shape whether LGBTQ+ youth engage, persist, and envision long-term futures within career pathways at all.

Structural Inclusion in Career Pathways

Effective LGBTQ+ career readiness requires structural inclusion within career pathways themselves.

Career and Technical Education, workforce programs, and career guidance systems cannot assume that general approaches meet the needs of all students equally. Research and practice guidance increasingly point to the importance of removing gender-binary structures, creating clear nondiscrimination policies, and building systems that allow students to participate without navigating unnecessary identity-based barriers.⁹⁵ Program design decisions, including how students are

grouped, how names and identities are handled, and whether staff are trained in affirming practice, directly affect participation and retention.

Educator and counselor preparation is also central to effective implementation. Many professionals working in career readiness systems receive limited training related to LGBTQ+ identity, career development, or affirming practice.⁹⁶ As a result, even well-intentioned guidance can unintentionally reinforce narrowed career pathways or assumptions about what options are realistic for LGBTQ+ youth. Effective systems do not rely on individual students to navigate exclusion on their own. They are intentionally designed to reduce unnecessary barriers and expand access to opportunity.

Wraparound and Youth-Led Support

Career readiness cannot be separated from broader conditions shaping young people's lives.

For LGBTQ+ youth managing depression, anxiety, housing instability, family rejection, or chronic minority stress, career exploration often competes with more immediate needs for stability and support.⁹⁷ Wraparound supports therefore function as career readiness interventions, not supplemental services. Mental health support, housing stability, financial wellness, peer connection, and family engagement all shape whether youth are able to consistently participate in education and workforce programs.

Peer support and youth leadership are particularly important. Research increasingly shows that LGBTQ+ youth are not passive recipients of support but active creators of affirming environments and community networks.⁹⁸ Programs that involve LGBTQ+ youth in design, leadership, and peer mentorship often show stronger engagement and retention because they reflect the realities young people are actually navigating.



Family engagement also matters. Parental acceptance is associated with reduced suicidality, stronger school belonging, and improved educational outcomes.⁹⁹ Supporting families with information, counseling, and connection to affirming resources can therefore strengthen career readiness indirectly as well.

The goal is not only to reduce harm. It is to create conditions in which LGBTQ+ youth can participate fully, expand their sense of possibility, and pursue career pathways without having to constantly choose between opportunity and safety.

Effective LGBTQ+ Career Readiness Requires:

Identity-Integrated Career Development

Structural Inclusion

Safety and Belonging

Wraparound Supports



Closing: Structural Conditions

The evidence in this landscape analysis describes not only what LGBTQ+ youth face, but the structural features of the landscape that any effort to support them must reckon with. These are not gaps that better programming alone can close.

Research on LGBTQ+ youth and career readiness

remains sparse. There are no federal data on LGBTQ+ participation in CTE, no published studies on credential attainment, and little longitudinal research tracking career outcomes over time. That evidence gap is now widening: federal SOGI data collection has been removed from major education and workforce systems, including the Civil Rights Data Collection and the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. As a result, the responsibility for generating evidence has increasingly shifted to community-based organizations and local systems. Organizations positioned to collect and publish outcome data disaggregated by LGBTQ+ identity may become some of the only sources of evidence on this population in the years ahead.

Throughout this landscape analysis, safety

repeatedly emerged as the condition that determines whether participation is possible in the first place. Across every domain this landscape analysis examined, safety emerged as the condition that determines whether everything else is possible. LGBTQ+ youth cannot engage with career exploration, persist in programs, or take professional risks in the same way as peers when they are managing anticipated or ongoing discrimination. Safety and belonging are not secondary concerns to address after the career content is in place. They are the first career readiness intervention. For many LGBTQ+ youth, career exploration is shaped not only by interest or ability, but by a more urgent question: what will happen if I pursue this?

The current systems designed to support career development were not built for this population.

Perkins V, the federal law governing Career and Technical Education, does not name LGBTQ+ youth. WIOA, the primary federal workforce development law for youth and adults, does not name them. The National Career Clusters Framework, the organizing structure underlying most career education curricula, does not address them. Career interest assessments were not designed with them in mind. This is a pattern of structural omission, not a collection of individual oversights. Changing individual programs without addressing these conditions will improve outcomes at the margins. Addressing them through data advocacy, policy engagement, practitioner training, and field-building is what changes the landscape.

The conditions this landscape analysis describes are not peripheral to career readiness. They are central to whether career readiness systems can deliver on their purpose for a significant and growing share of the young people moving through them.



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