Roadmap to Change:
Improving Policy Narratives for Young Black Workers

Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies

JOINT CENTER
FOR POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC STUDIES

PROJECT OBJECTIVE

Transform policy to help young Black people entering – or navigating – the workforce thrive, and reposition them in the public sphere as assets. Develop a narrative change framework and messaging elements that:

- Center young Black workers
- Engage key audiences
- Inform future communications

WHY NARRATIVE CHANGE?

"Narratives — our cultural understandings, frames of reference or mental models — play a significant role in how leaders create and implement policies, and how people on the ground react to them."

— "*The Power of Narrative in Economic Policy,*" Insight Center for Community Economic Development

WHY NARRATIVE CHANGE?

- By transforming the narratives that drive national public policy solutions around economic justice, we can transform the necessary systems and policies and help young Black workers thrive.

- As new narratives can only make their way into discourse through heavy repetition, we need an echo chamber to achieve narrative change.

- The more we echo messages and narratives, the stickier it becomes across movements for racial and economic justice.

BLACK YOUTH WORKER TASKFORCE

In 2022, the Joint Center brought together 11 young Black people with four-year college degrees working 40 hours a week in entry- to mid-level professional roles to form the **Joint Center Black Youth Worker Taskforce.** The taskforce informed and guided our narrative and communications work.

BLACK YOUTH WORKER TASKFORCE

- Cierra Baker
- Reshad Daniels
- Donovan Hunt
- Grant (G.E.) Loveless
- Nasir Mack
- Evan Wayne Malbrough

- Ian Moet
- Kaylah Oates-Marable
- Morgan Mitchell
- Ciarra Malone
- Sando Zou-Capuzzi

Narratives About Youth and Work

Research

METHODOLOGY

- Five sessions with the Black Youth Worker Task Force:

  - One listening session

  - Two discussions on narratives

  - One communications strategy session

- Comparable Campaigns Audit

  - Studied 11 pieces of media (with varying formats) concerning work and economic issues

METHODOLOGY (CONT.)

- Media Scan:

  - Included 55 news articles, reports, and press releases discussing Black workers

- Two Focus Groups:

  - We spoke with 14 participants about their experiences with work, including how they are perceived at work, how they make decisions about how to present themselves in work settings, and whether common media narratives about young Black workers rang true for them.
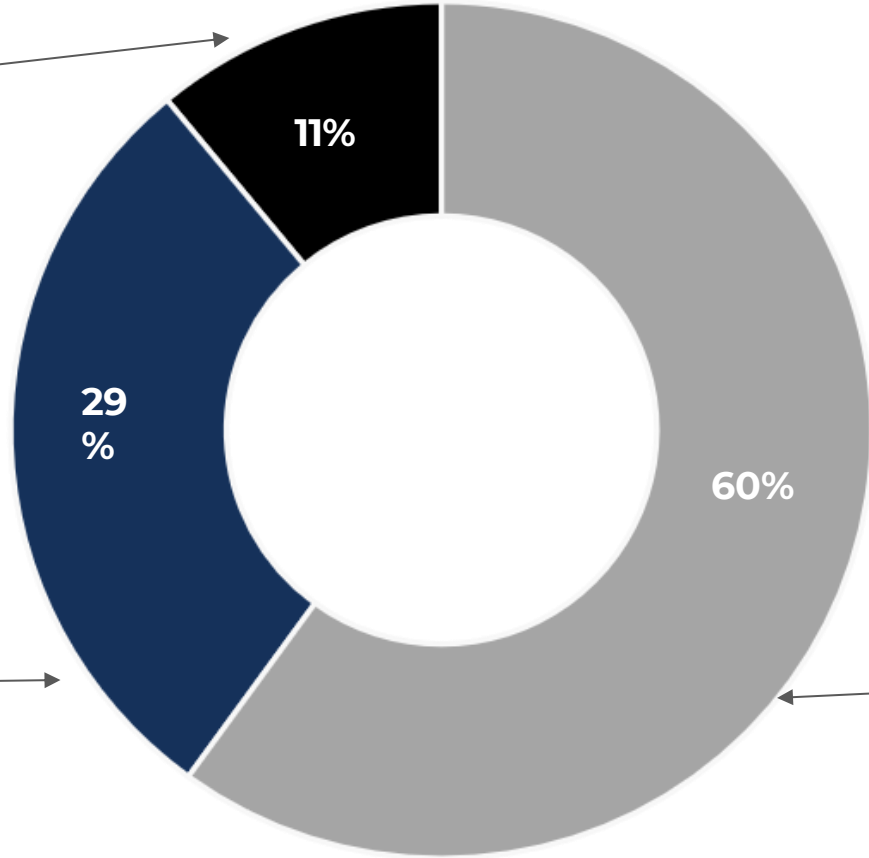
COMPARABLE CAMPAIGN AUDIT – TAKEAWAYS

- Black workers, young Black workers, Latino workers, or young LGBT workers are harmed by systemic discrimination. The dominant narrative was that these workers have been failed by policy and the institutions they work for.

- The most relevant media pieces noted that younger Black workers often face more obstacles than their older counterparts, meaning that this is possibly an under-explored (and perhaps under-resourced) area of demographic study.

Positive:
Mentions disparities that Black workers face, but also portrays Black workers as people with agency in advocating for their labor rights or creating inclusive work spaces

Neutral:
Mentions disparities that Black workers face, but also names the driving external forces in close proximity to the mention of Black workers

Negative:
Mainly identifies Black workers by the disparities they face without naming the driving external forces within the same paragraph/section

11%

29%

60%

Neutral
Positive
Negative

MEDIA SCAN – OVERVIEW

- Conducted a media scan using Google News' search engine to find the most relevant media mentioning Black workers.

- Examined 38 articles that mention "young Black workers" and 17 articles that mention "Black workers."

- Characterized each piece of media by publisher, a brief content analysis, which topics it mentioned the most, whether the medium included an analysis or mention of systemic barriers Black workers face, and the overall tone of the piece.

- We asked ourselves: Does this article mention systemic discrimination that Black workers face and/or offer a systemic explanation for the status of young Black workers?

MEDIA SCAN – OVERVIEW

- We narrowed our question down to whether the tone — specifically with respect to Black workers — was positive, negative, or neutral using the following criteria:

  - *Negative*: Content mainly identifies Black workers by the disparities that they face without naming the driving external forces within the same paragraph/section

  - *Neutral*: Content mentions disparities that Black workers face, but also names the driving external forces in close proximity to the mention of Black workers

  - *Positive*: Content mentions disparities that Black workers face, but also portrays Black workers as people with agency in advocating for their labor rights or creating inclusive work spaces

MEDIA SCAN – EIGHT TAKEAWAYS

1. More than half of all of the media we reviewed mentioned the unemployment rate among young Black workers, mostly comparing it to other racial groups to demonstrate that Black workers are more likely to be unemployed.

2. Second most mentioned topic: Labor rights, usually mentioned with respect to unionization and observations that Black workers fare better when they belong to a union.

3. Other top categories: Wages, racism, politics, and COVID.

MEDIA SCAN – EIGHT TAKEAWAYS (CONT.)

4. Data analysis and workforce trends were the predominant type of content for media concerning young Black workers.

5. News and opinion virtually tied for the second-most published type of media.

6. Most media pieces used a negative tone to describe young Black workers. Overwhelmingly, the content focused on the unemployment rate of young Black workers rather than labor market or systemic conditions leading to this pattern.

MEDIA SCAN – EIGHT TAKEAWAYS (CONT.)

7. Media focusing on young Black workers is sparse. On most search engines, the number of recent, high-engagement pieces of media that mention young Black workers specifically was low.

8. Media often mentioned the plight of Black workers in the context of all workers, but without systemic context.

FOCUS GROUPS – OVERVIEW

- 40 percent of focus group participants were 25 years or older, while 60 percent were 21-24 years old.

- 60 percent had a bachelor's degree, and almost all had at least some college experience; none were the first in their family to go to college.

- 20 percent were not employed and actively looking for work, while the remaining were employed up to 40 hours a week.

- Focus group participants hailed from the south, including Georgia and North Carolina.

FOCUS GROUP – FOUR TAKEAWAYS:
Bias and anti-Blackness in the workplace

- Young people expressed the pressure of having to navigate pervasive anti-Black narratives and stereotypes.

- Participants expressed being viewed as not educated enough or not knowledgeable, ambitious (negative), difficult to communicate with, lazy, and not capable.

- Many participants reported that their workplace counterparts viewed them as too demanding, difficult to relate to, or not knowledgeable enough.

"[People think] we are lazy or want handouts."

"Black workers can make a team more liable to racial discrimination and litigation, and therefore can pose a threat to an organization."

FOCUS GROUP – FOUR TAKEAWAYS:
"Qualified is enough"

- Young Black workers report that they often must exceed what would be reasonable qualifications for the roles that they seek, with participants feeling the weight of having to be overqualified for jobs.

"You either have to know everything there is to know … or have 15+ years of experience."

"[People assume] we only get to the places that we reach due to affirmative action."

FOCUS GROUP – FOUR TAKEAWAYS:
"Professionalism centers whiteness"

- Even when young Black workers gain much-coveted positions across industries, they report having to negotiate white-aligned dominant work culture to stay in their jobs and advance to higher positions.

"Professionalism centers whiteness. When we don't meet those standards, we are 'unprofessional,' 'ghetto', 'rude,' etc."

FOCUS GROUP – FOUR TAKEAWAYS:
The need to redefine Black excellence

- When viewed positively, the definition of Black excellence points to the high level of achievement, success, or ability demonstrated by Black individuals or communities.

- Most participants agreed that Black excellence can be toxic and pervasive when it comes to young Black workers, and several participants expressed a desire to relieve that pressure.

"Everyone isn't going to be a doctor or an attorney, but they went to school, they have a good job, and they're still impacting people; I feel like we always bring up Black excellence, but we never just let ourselves be regular."

"We never get to see us thrive in normalcy."

Messaging Elements

13 Key Principles

MESSAGING ELEMENTS

The following message elements and principles are informed by research-backed principles and best practices to develop strong and cohesive messaging in a broad range of contexts, with an emphasis on racial justice.

MESSAGING ELEMENTS #1

Address the connections between racial divisions and economic hardship.

Young Black people and Black communities are not vulnerable — they are strong, resilient communities who have been targeted, attacked, exploited, and systematically blocked from resources and opportunities.

Ex: Systemic racism, unchecked greed, and decades of disinvestment have created an economy that fails young Black workers and everyday Americans, leaving many behind.

MESSAGING ELEMENTS #2

Unite under the notion that racism is a tool to divide us all.

Acknowledge the ways racism is embedded — both historically and currently — in American policy and other systems. Name racial scapegoating or deliberate division as a tool villains use to profit, harming us all.

Ex: The cost of college began to rise quickly in the 1970s — the decade after the Civil Rights Act prohibited racial discrimination in education. Over the next several decades, a system designed to keep people of color out of schools grew to impact anyone who is not wealthy, regardless of their race.

MESSAGING ELEMENTS #3

Explicitly connect racial and economic justice.

Reiterating the interconnectedness of racial and economic justice helps people see that to build economic power for young Black people, we have to tackle both.

Ex: Capitalism is fueled by a myth of scarcity — a story that there are not enough resources for everyone — which leads to employment and economic policies that harm young Black workers.

MESSAGING ELEMENTS #4

Trace the history of systemic injustice and connect individual stories to systemic injustice rather than blaming individuals.

When announcing new data or new statistics about young Black workers, tell the story of how our economic systems came about as a result of racism, and a history of exclusion, discrimination, and disinvestment.

Ex: America was founded on a dream of freedom, but only the few have been able to realize our country's full promise.

MESSAGING ELEMENTS #5

Lead with shared values.

Shared values are points of agreement among different audiences and shared goals will resonate with target audiences, tap into their emotions, and motivate them to act.

Ex: We all deserve equal access to opportunity so we can live safe, stable, thriving lives; that includes Black youth.

MESSAGING ELEMENTS #6

Contextualize the problems facing young Black workers.

The challenges that young Black workers navigate are a threat to shared values and shared prosperity because of structural racism.

Ex: Even young Black workers who mastered the rules of the game are still cheated out of the American Dream.

MESSAGING ELEMENTS #7

Define villains or economic bad actors who have led to the current conditions faced by young Black workers.

Be specific about the actions villains who hurt everyday people and our economic well-being.

Ex: Elites have built the structures of our institutions, policymaking, and systems on the theft and abuse of Black people. They shape who has upward mobility, who can generate wealth, who is valuable, and who is expendable.

MESSAGING ELEMENTS #8

Tell stories that promote system level change, rather than individual-level change.

Use individual stories as windows into greater societal challenges. Make connections between the systems that people must navigate and the difficult choices they have to make because of it.

Ex: Why Black Workers in NYC Are Unemployed at Critical Levels — and What Can Be Done

MESSAGING ELEMENTS #9

Tie policy solutions to shared prosperity.

Emphasize how policies that empower and materially support young Black workers benefit everyone to boost broad support.

Ex: In the wealthiest nation in the world, there are no failed people — only failed systems.

MESSAGING ELEMENTS #10

Focus on asset-based framing.

When referring to young Black people (as well poor people and working families), talk about all the ways they contribute to our economy and communities.

Ex: Investing in young Black people is an investment in our collective future.

Offer well-rounded portraits of young Black people in every group and social background.

Show the complexity of their character outside of their paid labor, the range of emotions they experience, the scope of their ambitions, and the richness of their relationships to destigmatize them, humanize the issue, and build empathy.

Ex: "Everyone isn't going to be a doctor or an attorney, but they went to school, they have a good job, and they're still impacting people; I feel like we always bring up Black excellence, but we never just let ourselves be [regular]."

MESSAGING ELEMENTS #12

Include the voices of those closest to the problem.

Look for ways to make space for young Black people to speak.

Ex: "I have tattoos, I have my nose pierced, but that doesn't mean I can't get the job done. Just because I wear box braids doesn't mean I can't get the job done."

MESSAGING ELEMENTS #13

Focus on the stories of young Black workers, not just the numbers.

Humanize widespread social problems by putting faces, names, and stories to them. Statistics are useful for demonstrating the prevalence of a problem, but stories are what trigger empathy, cooperation, and memory and move people to address the problem.

Ex: Remote work gave them a reprieve from racism. They don't want to go back.

WORKS CITED

The elements in this guide draw from resources and guidance developed by:

- [Community Change](#)
- [Color of Change](#)
- [FrameWorks Institute](#)
- [Insight Center](#)
- [The Opportunity Agenda](#)

- [Race-Class Narrative Project](#)
- [Radical Communicators Network](#)
- [Winning Jobs Narrative Project](#)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS