



Environmental Justice, Jobs and Education: Seattle's Young Adults Speak Out

"No one knows what's best for us but us."



November 2013

Young Workers in the Green Economy

*Young people of color further the debate about
the economy and the environment on their own terms*

"It's a confusing time to be a young person ..."

- Yolanda Matthews, 33-year-old Rainier Valley resident

Young adults from Seattle's low-income communities and communities of color disproportionately suffer some of the greatest injustices as a result of the Great Recession. Most received messages growing up that, if you study hard, work hard, and go to college, you will be rewarded with a secure future. Instead, the ground has shifted under their feet. From staggering unemployment rates not seen since the Great Depression¹, to unprecedented numbers of young adults moving back in with their parents (or never moving out in the first place);² from cumulative student loan debt surpassing credit card debt³ to the sprawling use of unpaid internships that rarely lead to living wage jobs;⁴ it is indeed a confusing time to be a young person.

Yet young people's energy, vision, organization and willingness to speak truth to power created the critical turning point in our national dialogue about the economy and the causes of (and solutions to) the Great Recession. Young activists spearheading the Occupy Wall Street movement did what no members of Congress could do: They shifted the debate from the Tea Party platform to a national discussion about income inequality that resonated with a majority of the 99%.

Got Green was founded in 2008 with young adults of color who wanted to localize Van Jones' vision of a new, green economy that could alleviate global warming and poverty at the same. However, the hope and promise of tens of thousands of living wage jobs in local, green industries is taking longer to materialize than many in our communities can wait.

In January 2013, Got Green launched the Young Workers in the Green Economy Project, a place for young adults of color, from immigrant families, and from low-income backgrounds to further the debate about the economy and the environment, on their own terms.

Young adult leaders at Got Green surveyed their peers and learned that, while the media paints a picture that the country as a whole may be emerging from the Great Recession, young people of color in Seattle are not. Several barriers — a lack of financial access to college and vocational training; a lack of work experience and access to living wage jobs; and challenges to adequate transportation — are holding young people back from reaching their modest goals. Yet, in the face of economic hardship, young people of color in Seattle hold deep environmental and social justice values that could be channeled toward uplifting our communities and fighting climate change.

This report is the culmination of a 10-month process to listen to and document the experiences of young adults (ages 18-35) in Southeast and Central Seattle and amplify their voices for change.

This report not only identifies the experiences and barriers for young people, but recommends concrete, achievable policy changes to address these barriers. This report therefore also signifies the launch of a movement of young adults organizing and advocating for solutions to the inequalities that are plaguing our communities and degrading our environment.



METHODOLOGY:

Community Survey Lets Young People Speak for Themselves

On January 30, 2013, seven young people of color — many already active with Got Green — met to discuss the economic conditions that they and other members of their generation grapple with. “What is the biggest problem that young workers in our economy face?” they asked each other. Several problems and issues were raised around that table: “Ageism; lack of education/work experience/training; no access to job networks; ex-offender status; racism.” These served as the foundation for the survey that they spent the next three months developing and testing among their peers.

In May, the Young Workers in the Green Economy steering committee trained 30 volunteers — including several students enrolled in a race and social justice class at the University of Washington’s School of Social Work — to conduct community outreach. Volunteers collected face-to-face surveys among other young adults at sites in Central and Southeast Seattle.

From May through July 2013, the Young Workers in the Green Economy community organizer Mo! Avery, steering committee members and project volunteers collected surveys at community colleges, festivals, parks and street corners, and over coffee with their friends. They collected 146 surveys from other young adults, ages 18-35. Survey participants were thanked with a \$5 gift card.

The steering committee placed high value on designing a survey that would be a conversation

starter, and would allow young people to speak candidly about their experiences rather than merely check a box. The leading question, “What’s your priority right now — getting a job or a different job, going to school, both a job and school, or is all good for you right now?” was multiple choice. The majority of questions that followed were “open-ended” and survey volunteers coded the responses on a multiple choice sheet, and/or wrote in verbatim responses.

Not only did we ask young adults to describe their experiences — “What’s getting in the way of you pursuing your priorities or goals?” — we also asked them what changes they would like to see — “What do you think are solutions to improving the jobs and employment outlook for young people like yourself?”

Following the surveying period, the Steering Committee organized “community roundtables” to re-engage survey participants in deeper discussions about their experiences, solutions and community organizing. Twenty-four young adults — three-fourths of whom are people of color — participated in a roundtable. We also supported new, emerging young leaders to design and lead portions of the roundtable agendas.

This report presents the overall survey results, as well as testimonials from our emerging young leaders, to paint a complete picture of the responses received.



"People are struggling, and that needs to be acknowledged."

The last three years were really tough for me. I was struggling with unemployment, bouncing from job to job to job.

My job search was mostly online, and through staffing agencies. But the jobs that I got were through word of mouth. Then I was either taken advantage of or laid off without any cause. A lot of my friends have spent the past four years at a university or a community college. Unfortunately, when they applied to positions that their majors matched, they were turned down because they lacked work experience in those fields. Trying to go into bio-chemistry or work for a non-profit political organization, they ended up having to get jobs at Home Depot, Shell Gas Station or Guitar Center.

In my experience, it's almost impossible for someone to have the work experience and the educational background they need, because, if you're in school full-time working on a degree, most of the time you'll get a part-time job, if you're lucky. Or, if you're busy working full-time, what time do you have to go to school and commit those types of hours to study and get good grades to get the degree that you want?

Honestly, everyone – from young to old – is dealing with job issues. While this report is focusing on youth and unemployment with young workers, it will definitely open up a dialogue that needs to be dealt with. Even though people say there are a lot of benefits in this country and the national attitude is that everyone wants to come to America, people who live here are struggling to some degree, and that needs to be acknowledged.

The message that I want elected officials to take away is that these issues are real, these issues exist. If they aren't dealt with now, it's only going to get worse. The call to action that I would like them to take home is to start fighting for policies that allocate resources to create opportunities for people who have little education and little access to jobs.



THE PARTICIPANTS

For Young Adults Surveyed, Higher Education, Living Wage Jobs and Affordable Housing Are Out of Reach

While Seattle is celebrated for our music, hipster fashion (thank you, Macklemore) and software billionaires, communities of color in our city often fly under the radar. Survey participants (79% young people of color; 36% from immigrant families) described challenges accessing even the most basic of human rights: food, housing, education and jobs.

Of the 146 young people surveyed, 63% report having some college or post-secondary education under their belts; yet fewer than 30% have received a two- or four-year degree, or completed a one-year certificate program, while 14% lack a high school diploma or GED. Our city will have to focus attention and resources on access to higher education if our young people are to reach President Obama's goal of 60% of 25-34-year-olds earning some type of post-secondary degree by 2020.⁵

Food justice and access to healthy foods was a top priority identified by women of color in the 2011 report, *Women in the Green Economy: Voices from Southeast Seattle*. Unfortunately, our young adult survey participants share this struggle, with 29% accessing food stamps (compared to 16% of WA State residents⁶).

Forty-two percent of our survey participants told us their housing situation is "staying with friends or family." This mirrors a national trend – 36% of 18-31-year-olds live with their parents, according to the Pew Institute.⁷ It also implicates the skyrocketing rental housing rates in the city of Seattle.⁸

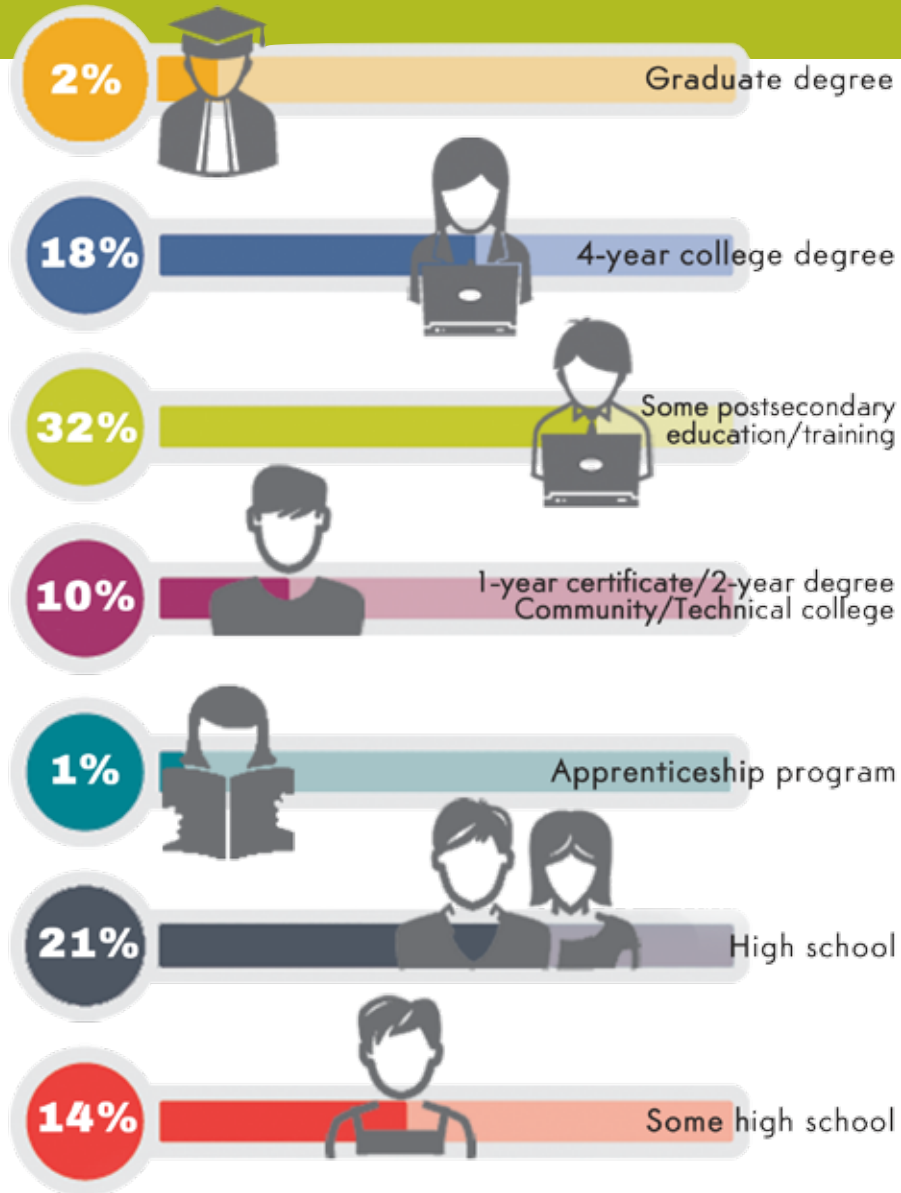
Young adults' inability to afford their own apartments is also linked to the lack of living wage jobs – or any job – available to our survey participants. Thirty-two percent of young people surveyed report being "unemployed, but looking for work"; another 24% are working part-time; and, for the wage-earners in our survey, 75% earn less than the Washington state living wage for a single adult (\$16.13 an hour).⁹

75% of participants make less than the Washington State living wage for a single adult (\$16.13/hour)



Median weekly wage in our survey = \$365

THE PARTICIPANTS



42% of participants are staying with friends and family.



Median weekly wage needed to afford sharing a 2-bedroom apartment in Seattle = \$626

THEIR PRIORITIES

Got Green Board member **Khalil Panni** said his own experience spurred him to help found the Young Workers in the Green Economy Project:

“For the past two years I’ve struggled with unemployment off and on. I always find out, when I’m applying for jobs, that they want you to have both education or training and work experience. Yet I’m noticing that if you’re busy trying to get one, you aren’t able to fulfill the other.”

A high number of young adults surveyed told us that their top priority is the combination of school and work (42%); however, only 16% are currently both working — either full- or part-time — and enrolled in school.

The survey data and personal stories paint a picture of young adults who are idealistic (one in four cited “wanting to make a difference” or “doing work that is meaningful” as a main motivator for them); applying themselves to reach their goals (83% are either working, in school or both); and striving for some version of the American Dream (57% said their main motivation is a job that can support a family or a “decent job”; and another 29% mentioned wanting benefits such as health care or a pension).

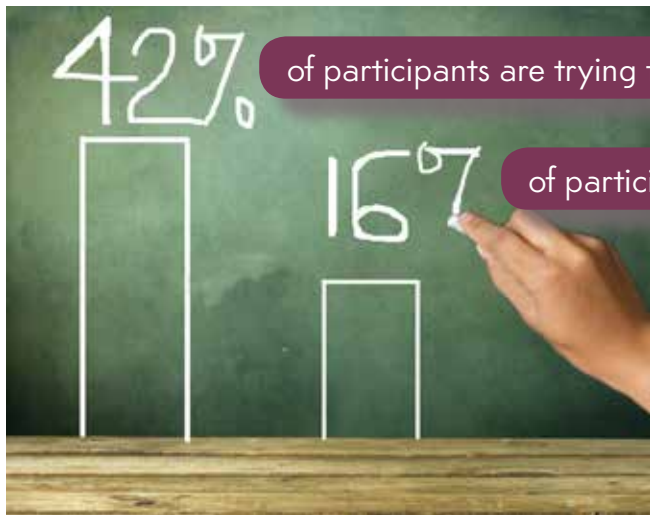
However, some very real barriers are impeding their progress. The top three barriers that were cited include: 1) Lack of financial access to college or vocational training, or not having the proper education and training required of jobs (23% and 18%, respectively); 2) Lack of work experience or skills required of jobs (21% cited this as a barrier and 29% said more paid internships, entry-level jobs, or professional mentoring programs would be good solutions); and 3) Transportation challenges (18% cited transportation as a barrier, and 32% do not have access to a car).

The flip side to discussing barriers is to examine opportunities. When asked, “How important for you is it to work in a job that is ‘green’ or good for the environment?,” two out of three young people chose 4 or 5 on a scale of 1–5. So, despite struggling to make ends meet, we learned that young people of color hold deep environmental values.

The challenge for our city is to create the right pathways and opportunities for young people of color to contribute to Seattle’s climate action goals, while advancing their own educational and employment goals and lifting up their communities of color as a whole.



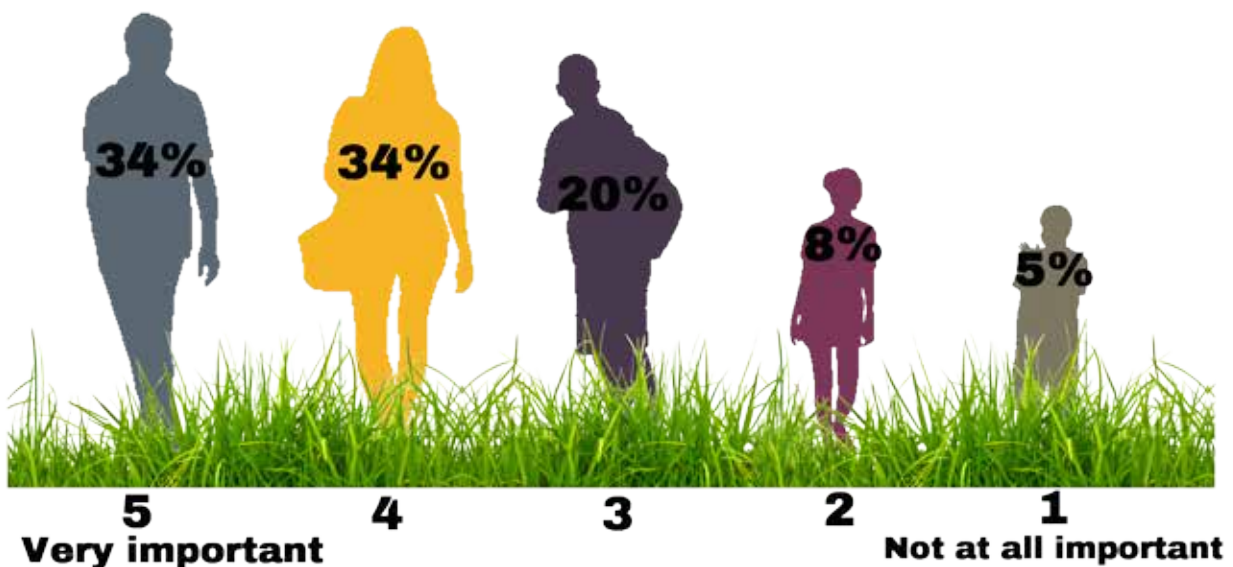
Large Numbers of Young Adults Surveyed Strive to Combine School and Work; Only a Few Achieve Their Goal.



42% of participants are trying to attend school and work at the same time.

16% of participants are actually achieving this.

Young people of color care deeply about the environment



On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being Very Important, and 1 being Not at all Important, how important to you is it to work in a job that is "green" or good for the environment? Why? **"We all benefit from a healthier environment"** = 62% said this or something similar.

"Nobody knows what's best for us but us."

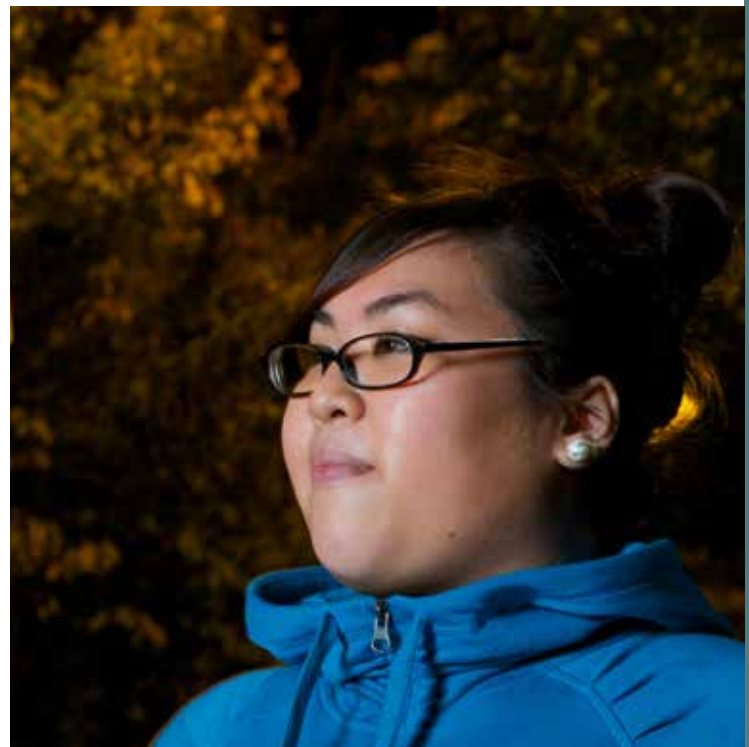
I am a low income, bi-lingual student. My parents are immigrants from Vietnam. I grew up in a house that didn't speak English at all. I had to balance speaking Vietnamese and English. It was really hard for me to learn. If I needed help with math or writing an essay, I would have to do it on my own or ask for help from other people.

Now that I'm out of high school, I should be in that college lifestyle but I'm not. My parents can't help me. They don't know what paperwork I need, they don't know how to help me get money for school, they don't know what sources to go to; they never experienced it.

Most forms to apply for FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) are in English. And when there are sessions that help people that are bilingual, it's during the time my parents are working. So I'm looking at this paperwork and I don't get it either because this is my first time doing it.When you're an immigrant, you kind of feel like an outsider.

It's really hard to find financial aid nowadays. **The money that they give students to go to school is decreasing every single day - and it's very competitive.** They base it off essays, interviews and your family background and history, how involved your parents are. For my parents, they can't be involved. My mom goes to work two jobs. It's really hard to find a situation at this moment to balance out my barriers and get financial assets to go college.

People in power like to say what's good for us. Nobody knows what's best for us but us. The politicians just really need to hear the people; they need to hear our stories. We have to come together; we have to tell them about our barriers and needs. If you have story, tell it because a lot of people will be relating to the same situation as you are and can take action too.



BARRIER #1: Financial Access to College and Training

“Higher education can’t be a luxury. It’s an economic imperative. Every American family should be able to afford to get it.”

— President Barack Obama, August 2013¹⁰

Sitting around a cramped table in Got Green’s Columbia City office, volunteers on the Young Workers in the Green Economy report development team discussed financial barriers to college and post-secondary education. Research consultant Bob Watrus raised eyebrows when he said income from his summer jobs allowed him to become the first in his family to get a college degree.

“I know a lot of young people have a hard time believing me,” said Watrus, 56, “but slinging burgers or cleaning buildings over the summer used to be enough to pay for college.”

In 1983, a University of Washington student working a full-time, minimum-wage job over summer and winter breaks could fund an entire year’s college tuition of \$1,302. Twenty years later, despite earning the highest minimum wage in the country, that same student would have to work, on average, 96 hours per week to fund their \$12,397 annual tuition.^{11/12}

The story of skyrocketing tuition is not really about how much it takes in 2013 vs. 1983 to pay professors, buy books and keep the classroom lights on. The real story is about how shrinking public investment in education has dramatically shifted the burden of funding college from federal and state government to students and their families.¹³

In answering the question, “What barriers are you facing to reaching your goals? What is getting in your way?,” the largest number surveyed by Got Green (23%) responded, “money to pay for school,” “cost of school,” “not enough financial aid,” or some variation of this theme. Tellingly, of the young people who told us their highest level of education attained is some post-secondary (but no degree), nearly two-thirds (61%) are not currently enrolled in school.

As government policy and structural adjustments have put education further and further out of reach for many, families of color and young people from immigrant families have been hit hard.

On the opportunity side of this equation, the number of young people of color surveyed who prioritized working in environmentally friendly jobs, along with the promise of many high-wage jobs in “green” careers, presents a good match. A recent study in Oregon found that four-fifths of green jobs requiring at least a bachelor’s degree paid \$25 an hour or higher, as well as two-fifths requiring some post-secondary education or vocational training.¹⁴

Our city and state need to immediately prioritize making college and vocational training financially accessible to young people of color, to be sure that the human potential and pro-environment values among young people from our communities do not go to waste.

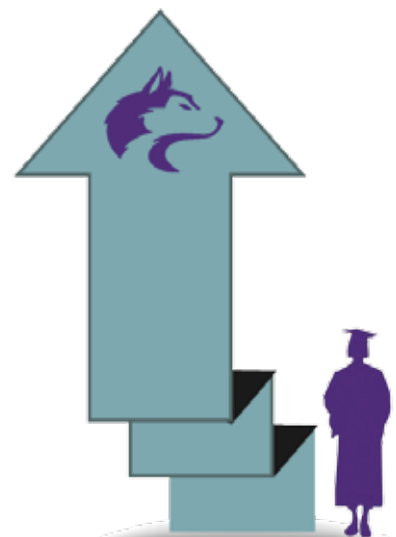
UW Annual
Tuition in 1983:
\$1302



Minimum wage summer job @
40 hours/week = 1983 UW Tuition

Minimum wage summer job @
96 hours/week = 2013 UW Tuition

UW Annual
Tuition in 2013:
\$12,397



FINANCIAL ACCESS TO COLLEGE AND TRAINING: RECOMMENDATIONS

Support policies and programs that increase financial access to college and vocational training for young adults of color.

- Support a City of Seattle levy to fund pathways to college or vocational training for all graduating seniors from Seattle high schools. Like the “13th Promise Year”, this levy should fund at least one year of community college and help young people navigate college financial aid and admissions.

Remove barriers that limit young adults of color from accessing college or vocational training.

- Remove the drivers license requirement to enter most building and construction trades’ “earn-while-you-learn” apprenticeships.
- Repeal restrictions that bar young people convicted of drug-related offenses from receiving student financial aid.
- Clarify or amend SNAP/Food Stamp policies in Washington state to allow low-income students working in unpaid internships (in addition to paid jobs and work study) to receive food stamps.

Figure 6: Cuts have Eliminated Financial Aid for Thousands of College Students

Served vs unserved students eligible for the State Need Grant

In 2007, only 2% of eligible students went unserved.



In 2010, 25% were unable to receive aid.



Source: Budget & Policy Center analysis; Data from HECB

Infographic reprinted with permission from the Washington State Budget and Policy Center

"I have a lot of knowledge from lived experience."

In my last year of college, I got really passionate about doing anti-violence against women's work. I applied for jobs while I was at school and I thought I would be able to have a job in my field. But, instead, I started working at Urban Outfitters part-time.

I went on food stamps as soon as I started at Urban Outfitters because I knew that would be the only way I would be able to eat. I applied to an AmeriCorps job kind of on a whim. I was like, 'AmeriCorps or a full-time retail job?' My professor warned against AmeriCorps, because she said it was a lot of work for little pay. But I needed the experience.

It was a lot of work. And I just don't understand the point of paying people under the minimum wage. For the first month and a half, I kept working for Urban Outfitters, and that's how I was able to sustain myself; but I was working seven days a week.

On the AmeriCorps budget, I couldn't go to the dentist, and I had a tooth problem for a really long time. I had to cut out buying extra food. There were points where I ran out of food stamps and I ran out of money, so I had to go sell my clothes.

Since I finished AmeriCorps at the end of July, I've been unemployed. My AmeriCorps placement couldn't hire me at the time because they didn't have money in their departments. But now that they do, they have hired two people in my place, making \$17-\$19 an hour. **So, essentially, my job was worth \$34-\$40 an hour, and I was working for \$6 an hour!**

I've applied to a couple of places, but they're looking for master's degrees, or it's part-time without benefits. ... A lot of my frustration is out of knowing that I have a lot of knowledge and I'm not being respected for that. A lot of my knowledge is from lived experience and not just knowledge from school. As a young, queer black woman, it shouldn't be this difficult to find paid work to support people from my own community.



BARRIER #2: Paid Work Experience and Living Wage Jobs

“We are the 99%”
— Slogan of the Occupy Movement

Many of us were captivated by the young people in the Occupy Movement. They forced an honest, democratic debate about the flagging economy and called on government to solve the crisis by reigning in big business and tackling income inequality.

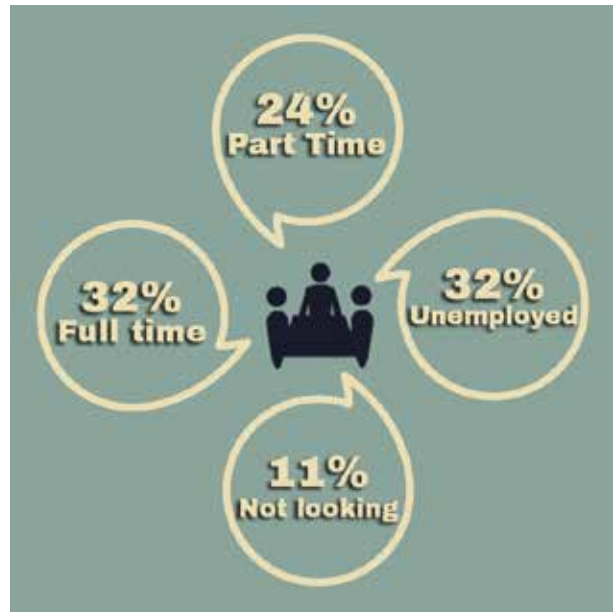
Two years later, young adults of color in Seattle told Got Green that there has not been enough government intervention to significantly improve their job prospects. From college graduates working at Subway, Home Depot and Urban Outfitters (and we don't mean in the corporate offices) to young people unable to find any job at all; from eager young workers victimized by wage theft to idealistic AmeriCorps volunteers unable to afford dental care; the Young Workers in the Green Economy project collected story after story demonstrating the devastating — and ongoing — impacts of the Great Recession on communities of color and the young.

In 2010, the Washington state unemployment rate among African-American young people ages 18-34 was 24%; for Latino young adults, 16%.¹⁵ In our survey, 32% of young people told us they are out of work but looking. Survey and roundtable participants frequently spoke of the intense competition in the job market, and cited “lack of work experience” as the reason most often given when being turned down for a job.

“Speaking for the youth in my community, it's so tough, so competitive now,” says Sarah Tran of the Vietnamese Friendship Association, “How can you gain three to five years of experience if no one will give you that opportunity? (Employers) don't acknowledge that there's work you can do even if you are somewhere on that spectrum between no English and fluent.”

In 2010, when Got Green launched a green construction job training program with the Laborers Union (LiUNA), the aim was to give graduates — 97% people of color — a direct entry point into the promising home weatherization industry. Then the industry failed to ramp up, leaving most of our graduates high and dry.

Employment Status of our survey participants



WA State Unemployment rate in 2010 for all young adults 18-34 (14%); African American young adults (24%); Latino young adults (16%)

This narrative has been repeated locally and nationally; economic stimulus dollars were used to launch successful “green” vocational training, and high numbers of students completed the training; but the jobs at the other end didn't materialize.

Yet, Got Green continues to believe that the movement to halt climate change must persevere. From 2009 to 2011, public sector green jobs in Washington state declined by 48% (vs. an 18% decline in the private sector).¹⁶ With our City budget back in the black, we must reinvest in living wage jobs in our public transit, utilities and parks systems and create pathways for young people from disadvantaged neighborhoods. Where a greening of private sector jobs has succeeded — as in construction — new measures, such as Targeted Local Hiring, can ensure that young adults of color get these jobs.

With CO2 levels at 393 parts per million, now is not the time to back off of Van Jones' vision: “To change our laws and culture, the green movement must attract and include the majority of all people.” Young people of color are telling us that jobs and economic opportunity are a way to do that. Let's listen.

Paid Work Experience and Living Wage Jobs: RECOMMENDATIONS

Increase access to living wage employment and paid work experience for young adults of color.

- Pass a \$15-an-hour minimum wage in the City of Seattle. Require agencies hosting AmeriCorps-type positions to provide housing, increase the living stipend, or otherwise compensate volunteers so they are not living in poverty. Ensure that “green internship” or “green corps” work experience programs pay the (new) minimum wage.
- Pass the Targeted Local Hire (TLH) Ordinance, and, in the future, apply TLH principles to public transit, public utility and other public sector living wage green jobs.



Decline in green jobs in Washington state



"I'm wasting my youth away on the bus"

I work a part-time job. I take a bus – actually a few buses – everyday. That's a ride that, with a car, would take maybe 12-15 minutes and, on the bus, takes a good hour. So, I work four hours a day and commute two hours a day.

I feel like so much time of my life is spent on buses. I feel like I'm wasting my youth away on the bus. I probably spend a good three hours, a fifth of my day, on buses!

One of the big changes that would affect me and a lot of my friends is an option for low-income people – a lower bus fare. I'm spending \$100 a month on transportation. **It's kind of ridiculous that I'm paying as much as some executive sitting next to me on the bus, considering my income.**

I think a lot about the way space is used, and who gets to benefit from that. It seems kind of messed up to me that we all have to share this space in the city and still-empty lots are turning to concrete so that people who have cars can park them. There are other things that could be done with that space. I feel like the government directs so many funds to services for people with cars, like parking lots. This just says a lot about who the city sees as important.

Who is seen as important are people who have access to cars, people who have good jobs. What they're leaving out are the people who don't have that. These bus cuts are a really good example of them not really giving a f*ck about people who ride buses. Whenever anybody is late, it's always because "my bus broke down." A lot of my co-workers live paycheck to paycheck, and to think that you could lose your job for the bus breaking down or being late is kind of terrifying.



BARRIER #3: Public Transportation

“I’d like to be remembered as a person who wanted to be free and wanted other people also to be free.” — Rosa Parks ¹⁷



Buses have played a significant and symbolic role in our movement for racial and economic justice. The Montgomery Bus Boycotters of 1955-56, the Freedom Riders of 1964 and the immigrant Freedom Riders of 2003 all are community-organizing icons.

Public transportation and race are inextricably linked in our country. Whether we’re talking about public transportation

systems designed to prevent African-Americans from accessing the suburbs (like MARTA in Atlanta),¹⁸ or white communities’ virulent response to busing strategies used to desegregate public schools (like the Boston Busing Crisis), it is difficult to discuss urban public transit without discussing race.

Thus, it was not a surprise that transportation to school and work was the third most-often-cited barrier by young adults (42% African-American or East African, and 79% people of color overall) in our Young Workers in the Green Economy survey. Young people describe the myriad ways in which our overburdened public transportation system has caused them to miss employment opportunities and set them back in achieving their goals. Late buses, long transit times, routes that require transfers through downtown, overloaded buses; these themes were repeated by survey participants.

In Seattle overall, only 16% of households lack access to a car;¹⁹ but 32% of young people of color in our survey must rely on public transportation or alternate means to get to school and work. A preliminary analysis of travel times to local community colleges shows that there are no public transportation options allowing students in the Rainier Beach and south Rainier Valley neighborhoods to reach a community college in less than 30 minutes.²⁰ Factoring in wait times during transfers, and the walk to the bus stop, we can assume that travel times to area colleges are significantly longer.

King County Metro’s bus system is currently in crisis. The State Legislature needs to act to allow our local public transit system the taxing authority it needs to simply keep the current fleet on the road. Yet, in the midst of this crisis, there is the very real possibility that the issue of race and disparity in our public transportation system will be ignored.

Fact is, now is the time to elevate the issue of racial justice, to pay respect to Rosa Parks and the thousands of warriors for equality that have used the bus as a symbol of freedom. Let’s make sure that, for young people of color in our communities, the bus (and Light Rail) can provide them with the mobility and opportunity they need to move forward on their life goals.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION: RECOMMENDATIONS

Make public transportation a more affordable, efficient and accessible means for young adults of color to get to school and work.

- Create a low-income, reduced-transit fare for all low-income residents — regardless of age. Define low-income by local standards — not federal poverty guidelines.
- Oppose bus route cuts in general, and specifically oppose cuts that further impede travel to and from Southeast Seattle and area community colleges and workplaces.
- Bring the college to the people: Support the creation of a community college branch in Rainier Beach or a nearby Southeast Seattle neighborhood.

Rainier Beach is an education access desert.



Oliver Williams, 22

"I had to drop out of school because I couldn't afford the fare to get there."

I got involved with Got Green during the Young Workers in the Green Economy survey. The main thing that hit me about the survey was the transportation issue. I wanted to try to make a difference in the problem because the transportation that we have now is just horrible. I want to try to make a difference, to make it better.

For me, in general, buses are horrible. For instance, the #7 is supposed to run every 10-15 minutes. But when you're out there waiting on the bus, it's like 30 minutes. To wait that long is time-consuming when you really need to go places. And the fare is just outrageous.

Since I'm unemployed, I don't really have the money to go places, since it costs too much. I can't really get around and go to job interviews like I want. When I did have a job, on my first day, I was late because the #28 wasn't on time and I had to wait 30 minutes for the next one. I was 30 minutes late getting to work on my first day, so I got yelled at because of the bus.

I used to go to the International Academy of Design and Technology, which is in Tukwila. I had to drop out of school though because I couldn't afford the fare to get on the bus to get to school.

If there are more bus cuts, they will affect me. If there are fewer buses on the streets, the wait will be longer. **For policy-makers thinking about the bus cuts, we need lower fares, more buses running on time and more frequently, and a safer environment on the bus.**



CONCLUSION

Strategies Needed for Communities of Color to Prosper and Address Climate Change



In 2011, the Brookings Institute placed Seattle in the top five U.S. cities for desirability among young adults who were flocking here after high school or college.²¹ Brookings attributed this to Seattle being a place in which “young people can feel connected and have attachments to colleges or universities among highly educated residents.”²¹ This image of Seattle is one that many local leaders may prefer to acknowledge. This report, however, demonstrates that young adults in Southeast and Central Seattle face significant challenges accessing even the most basic of human rights: food, housing, education, and jobs.

Many young people surveyed want to be on a pathway to a better future, through higher education and better paying jobs, and meaningful ways to serve their community and improve the environment. But the barriers to achieving their goals are difficult to overcome. Higher education and job training can be inaccessible; living wage jobs or any paid work experience in a desired field are hard to find; and getting to school or work via public transportation is extremely difficult.

A 2011 Daily Beast blog declaring Seattle the second-worst city to live in if you are a young adult more closely mirrors the reality of young adults surveyed.²² The Daily Beast arrived at this designation by crunching statistics on unemployment, housing, education attainment and debt among residents ages 18-34. One thing is for certain: Whether you are a recent transplant or life-long Seattle resident, if you are a young adult of color, it is unlikely that you are experiencing opportunity and prosperity in our city.

This report identifies many policy initiatives that can begin to address the inequities experienced by our survey participants. It is also important for elected officials to understand and promote city policy in ways that address social justice. In his introduction to the City of Seattle’s 2013 Climate Action Plan, for example, City Councilmember Mike O’Brien says, “The plan does more than provide a vision for climate leadership; it also provides a vision for a city that is vibrant, economically prosperous, and socially just.”²³ Spurred by the experiences and passions of the 146 young adults we surveyed, Got Green and the Young Workers in the Green Economy Project will work to make this vision a reality.

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got green?

Environment, Equity, and Opportunity

Got Green is a grassroots organizing group – led by people of color, and based in Southeast Seattle – that works to ensure that the benefits of the green movement and green economy – green jobs, access to healthy food, energy efficient and healthy homes, and public transit – reach low income communities of color.

We do this by cultivating leaders - especially 18-35 year olds - to educate, advocate, organize and build coalitions.

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