



**Cowen Institute**  
TULANE UNIVERSITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Life After High School

Economic opportunities and postsecondary education among New Orleans youth

# Introduction

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**The first few years after high school are often viewed as critical, laying the groundwork for the rest of a young person’s life. Decisions made between the ages of 18–24 can influence a number of life outcomes, including the ability to establish a satisfying and financially sustaining career. To that end, this executive summary, along with the accompanying website, provide a descriptive overview of educational and employment data on young people in New Orleans, with a focus on their post-high school lives.**

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In order for young people to make informed decisions about career pathways and the pursuit of postsecondary degrees and certifications, it’s critical for families and educators to have access to data on the local economy, the national economy, and postsecondary education options. However, data on these topics often remains disconnected and decentralized. One goal of our interactive website is to bring economic and educational data about New Orleans youth together in one place, to ease the burden of information-gathering for our families, educators, and practitioners.

Questions on postsecondary life can be difficult to answer and, at least in terms of New Orleans’ youth, have received less attention than issues related to K-12 education. There are a number of good reasons for this. The first has to do with data access and availability. While the city’s youth are enrolled in public K-12 schools, we have access to data on their academic performance, key demographics, and other mandated state and national indicators. This data, along with other school-based measures, enables us to craft a narrative about New Orleans’ young people while they’re enrolled in K-12 public schools.

But what happens next? Having a more in-depth understanding of postsecondary outcomes among New Orleans’ youth can help educators, families, counselors, policy makers, and employers navigate the transitional period from high school to whatever comes next.

We hope that our executive summary and website serve as a foundation for a broader discussion about these pivotal questions. While we have used some of the best economic and educational data sources available (*see the methodology section on the website for a full breakdown*), it is descriptive in nature and has limitations. No amount of data can ever construct a complete picture of the individual experiences of every young person in the city. But the available data can offer us a strong baseline impression about the lives of New Orleans’ youth after high school from which we can draw important conclusions about how to better serve young people going forward.

## KEY FACTS: JOBS

### The jobs most commonly worked by young people & average wages

<b>Waitstaff</b> 2,229 TOTAL	<b>\$9.90/hr</b>
<b>Cashiers</b> 1,834 TOTAL	<b>\$9.90/hr</b>
<b>Retail Sales</b> 1,256 TOTAL	<b>\$13.50/hr</b>
<b>Fast Food and Counter Workers</b> 1,121 TOTAL	<b>\$10.40/hr</b>
<b>Food Prep Workers</b> 1,003 TOTAL	<b>\$9.80/hr</b>



A total of  
**12.4%**

of jobs across the city are occupied by young people aged 14-24.

### The largest industries in New Orleans

- 1 Accomodation & Food Services
- 2 Government
- 3 Health Care & Social Assistance

### College-going rates among New Orleans' youth are increasing,

with 61.0% of New Orleans 2017 public high school graduates enrolling in college the following fall.

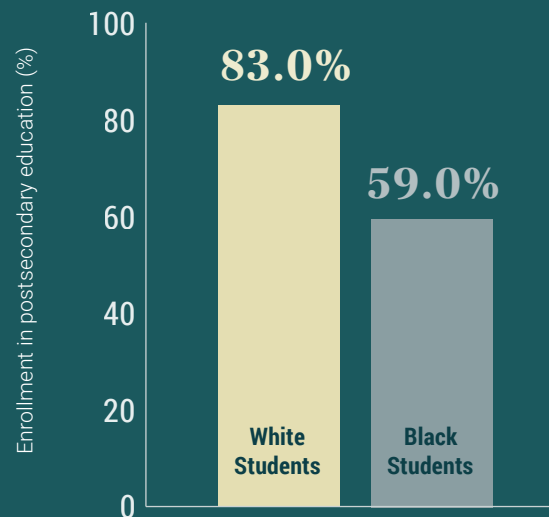


**77.0%**  
of college-going students from New Orleans attend in-state post-secondary institutions.



**64.7%**  
of college-going students from New Orleans attend schools in the city.

## KEY FACTS: EDUCATION



While 83.0% of White public school students enrolled in postsecondary education immediately after high school, 59.0% of Black public school students did the same.

# Key Findings

This executive summary provides an overview of the key findings from the baseline data on employment and educational pathways of New Orleans youth. For a full descriptive analysis of the data, please visit [www.cowendata.org](http://www.cowendata.org).

## Postsecondary Education

As the data in this section focuses on the postsecondary outcomes of New Orleans' public high school students, it's important to understand some basic demographic information about these students and the context of their school system. New Orleans' public education system often receives national attention due to its unique governance model, being the only public school system in the country comprised almost exclusively of charter schools.

As of October 2018, New Orleans' 86 public schools were serving 50,451 PK-12 students. The majority of New Orleans' public school students are students of color (91.4%), most of whom are Black (78.5%). As is common in other urban districts, most of the city's students are from low-income backgrounds (81.4%).<sup>1</sup> Enrollment in the system follows a school choice model and no students are assigned to neighborhood schools according to geographic catchment zones. Yet despite citywide open enrollment policies, inequities persist along racial and economic lines.<sup>2</sup>

For this project, we reviewed the available data on the postsecondary educational pathways of New Orleans' high school graduates. Our key findings are:

### **1 More young people than ever from New Orleans are enrolling in college, but the re-enrollment rate remains lower than the state and national averages.**

College-going rates among New Orleans' youth are increasing, with 61.0% of New Orleans' 2017 high school graduates enrolling in college the following fall semester. 71.0% of those students enrolled in four-year institutions. Despite the improvement in college enrollment over time, the city still lags behind state and national re-enrollment rates from year one to year two.<sup>3</sup>

### **2 Youth from New Orleans who matriculate to postsecondary institutions are generally attending in-city or in-state institutions.**

A large majority (77.0%) of college-going students from New Orleans attend in-state postsecondary institutions, with nearly two-thirds (64.7%) attending schools in the city. Delgado Community

1. LDOE October 2018 Multi-stat count total by site, including Type 2 charters, Youth Study Center, Orleans Parish Central Office, NOCCA.

2. For more information, see the State of Public Education in New Orleans 2018: [http://www.thecoweninstitute.com.php56-17.dfw3-1.websitetestlink.com/uploads/SPENO\\_2018\\_Final\\_-\\_Single\\_Page\\_Spread-1524079672.pdf](http://www.thecoweninstitute.com.php56-17.dfw3-1.websitetestlink.com/uploads/SPENO_2018_Final_-_Single_Page_Spread-1524079672.pdf).

3. Of public school graduates from the class of 2015-16 who had a "seamless college transition", 72.1% of students from N.O., 76.9% of students from Louisiana, and 73.4% nationwide. Data sources: LDOE and USDOE.

College (21.5%), the University of New Orleans (12.0%), and Southern University New Orleans (11.3%) absorb the largest numbers of college goers from New Orleans high schools.<sup>4</sup>

### **3 At the institutions most frequented by New Orleans' high school graduates, completion and graduation rates are lower than state and national averages.<sup>5</sup>**

Completion rates at Delgado Community College, University of New Orleans, and Southern University New Orleans are lower than the state averages for public institutions (47.9% for four-year institutions, 20.3% for two-year and technical colleges).<sup>6</sup>

### **4 Gaps exist along racial and socioeconomic lines in college access, enrollment, and persistence.**

In 2017, 83.0% of White public school students from New Orleans enrolled in postsecondary education immediately after high school graduation, compared to 59.0% of Black public school students. This varied greatly by the high school the student attended, with Black students

at selective admissions public schools enrolling in college at a notably higher rate (>90%) than those in open enrollment schools.<sup>7</sup>

### **5 There is no operational system in place for gathering and tracking centralized, reliable, city-wide data on college persistence.**

The current methods of tracking college enrollment and persistence among New Orleans' public high school graduates are patch-worked and incomplete. Without centralized, publicly available, and comparable city-wide data on college-going and persistence, it's impossible to gain a complete picture of the landscape of our secondary and postsecondary educational outcomes.

4. BoR data, last calculated in 2016 for all Orleans Parish graduates attending in-state public institutions.

5. BoR and IPEDS data, calculated at 150% of the normal time to earn a degree, which is six years for a bachelor's degree and three years for an associate's degree. Most recent data for bachelors degree is from the matriculating class of 2011-2012, while the most recent data for two-year colleges & technical schools is from the matriculating class of 2014-15. Using completion and graduation rate for those within starting institution.

6. BoR (2019). Higher Education Fact Book: 2018-19. <http://as400.regents.state.la.us/pdfs/Retention/hesfb/Louisiana-Higher-Education-Fact-Book.pdf>.

7. LDOE College Enrollment Data 2016-17.



## Economic Opportunities

By almost all indicators, Orleans Parish has an economy that is less diversified than many other regions in the United States and is highly dependent upon a few lower-paying industries. In 2017, the median Orleans Parish household income was around \$38,700, which was significantly lower than the national average of \$57,700. Additionally, job growth is lower in Orleans Parish than the country as a whole, and the unemployment rate is higher.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the city's economy is highly reliant on hospitality and tourism, most specifically the accommodation and food services industry. While the regional economy offers some diversified opportunities in other professions, the region's public transportation infrastructure can severely impede people's ability to access reliable ways to get to work.

Based on our descriptive review of the labor market data, our key findings are:

### **1** New Orleans' youth aged 14–24 occupied 12.4% of the jobs in Orleans Parish in 2018.

Many of these young people worked in *accommodation and food services* and *retail trade*. In Orleans Parish, 42.5% of employed 14–24 year olds worked in one of these two industries, and the number extends to 48.7% in the greater New Orleans region. Nationally, 41.5% of youth worked in one of these two industries.<sup>9</sup> This fact reflects both the local economy, where the *accommodation and food services* industry employs the largest number of overall workers, and national trends, wherein these two industries

employ the highest number of young people across the country.<sup>10</sup>

### **2** Nationally, young people are over-represented in low-earning jobs and specifically, in the *accommodation and food services* and *retail trade* industries.

Given their age and the limited number of years they have had available to gain work experience, it is not surprising that youth, especially those without credentials, are over-represented in jobs that require little or no experience. However, these jobs also often pay low wages and offer limited within-industry advancement opportunities.<sup>11</sup>

### **3** Healthcare has the potential to be a local growth industry for youth to advance economically.

Based on recent job listings, the most in-demand job skill in Orleans Parish is nursing. Additionally, while the highest paying jobs in the healthcare industry require advanced credentials, there are many jobs available for those with a variety of educational backgrounds. There are also many healthcare employment opportunities in neighboring Jefferson Parish.<sup>12</sup>

### **4** Economic opportunity, access, and success vary greatly along the lines of race.

People of color are underrepresented in higher paying occupations and industries. For example, White workers account for more than half of all those in the top ten highest paid jobs in the city.<sup>13</sup>

8. Emsi, "Economy Overview" analysis report for Orleans Parish for 2018.

9. Emsi, industry tables for Orleans Parish, Greater New Orleans region, and the United States for 2018.

10. Emsi, Occupational Data for Orleans Parish for 2018.

11. Emsi, Occupational Data for the United States for 2018.

12. Emsi, Job Posting Data for Orleans Parish and the New Orleans MSA for 2018.

13. Emsi, Occupational Data for Orleans Parish for 2018.

# Conclusion

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**In this executive summary and the accompanying website, we set out to provide baseline data to begin a larger conversation about how we measure and define postsecondary success for New Orleans' youth. Overall, our findings are both promising and discouraging.**

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From an educational standpoint, it is encouraging that more New Orleans' youth than ever before are pursuing a postsecondary degree. This is true of young people from all subgroups, including students of color and those from low-income backgrounds. However, educators and practitioners lack access to comprehensive and current citywide data to gain a full picture of their college performance, persistence, graduation, and degree attainment.

From an economic perspective, the majority of young workers are in low-paying occupations. This is reflective of national trends but is also indicative of the limitations of the city's economy, which is overly dependent on low-wage industries. While young workers nationwide are more likely to work in low-wage jobs and industries, there are relatively fewer opportunities in New Orleans beyond those low-wage industries than in other regions. Therefore, there is an increased risk that a low-wage job after high-school may lead to a low-wage career pathway for life. To ensure that young people have access to sustainable, living-wage local careers, we must work to improve both college-going *and* persistence and economic opportunity in the region.

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# Looking Ahead

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Based on the key findings from the education and economic data, we've made the following recommendations to improve outcomes for young people in our city.

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## 1. Improve the quality and pay of entry-level jobs for young people in the city

**a. Increase the minimum wage:** A large number of young people in the city aged 24 and under work in industries that pay less than the citywide living wage of \$11.25 for a single adult.<sup>14</sup> In a city with a larger than average number of entry-level, low-wage positions, a citywide minimum-wage increase would raise living standards among a large section of the population.

**b. Create incentives for local employers to adopt "high road practices":**<sup>15</sup> Given the number of entry-level jobs in New Orleans, the city should incentivize local businesses who adopt "high road practices" such as paying a living wage, providing benefits, and promoting career advancement from entry-level positions. The implementation of high road practices can measurably improve the lives of young workers, many of whom currently work low-wage, entry-level positions, and has become increasingly popular among large national corporations (e.g. Amazon, Target). Locally, the Oschner Hospital System, the largest employer in the region and state, now starts employees above the living wage standard for a single adult at \$12 per hour.

## 2. Improve access to sustainable career opportunities

**a. Invest in career training programs:** Local

non-profit organizations including YouthForce NOLA, the New Orleans Career Center, Operation Spark, and the Earn and Learn program at the Cowen Institute, focus on aligning career and technical education with the opportunities available in the local economy. The city would benefit from more career training programs, particularly those featuring partnerships with local employers.

**b. Improve transportation infrastructure:** In order for New Orleans youth to maximize their access to local career options, there must be an improvement in access to, and dependability of, local public transportation options, as many higher-paying jobs are in neighboring parishes. The Ochsner Health System, the largest employer in the region, has campuses in neighboring Jefferson Parish and is positioned within a key growth industry. Frequent, affordable, dependable, and well-connected public transportation routes from Orleans Parish to neighboring parishes would improve young people's access to a greater number of jobs. Orleans and Jefferson parish lawmakers should consider additional dedicated revenue streams to support public transportation.

**c. To build careers in certain economically viable industries, local youth may want to remain open to the idea of working outside of the region.**

Ideally, our local economy would offer a wide range of financially sustainable career opportunities for

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14. MIT Living Wage Calculator.

15. For more information on High Road practices: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0019793917738757>.



our young people. At the present moment, this isn't always the case. Not every young person has the means or desire to relocate for work but this could be an option for some, particularly those who have an interest in working in key areas of national growth, such as computer science and programming.

### 3. Remove barriers to higher education for underrepresented students

**a. Reduce the financial barriers to accessing higher education:** Many students from New Orleans are from low-income families and thus, college can be prohibitively expensive. By ensuring that TOPS and GoGrants have dedicated funding streams, encouraging and supporting FAFSA completion, and maintaining an accessible database of national and local scholarships, we can reduce some of the financial barriers for college-going students from our city.

**b. Ensure that high schools and support staff have the resources, training, and professional networking opportunities necessary to advise students on options:** In order to help students identify best-fit colleges, complete applications, access financial aid, and prepare for postsecondary life, school staff need access to resources, professional development, and a network of dedicated professionals who are working in their field. There are already collaboratives for college and career counselors, college persistence advisors, and school leaders. The city would likely benefit from the continuation of these and the development of new collaborative groups.

### 4. Focus on improving college retention and graduation, particularly among underrepresented students

**a. Institutions of higher education can incorporate research-based programming:** There are a number of evidence-based programs for first-generation students from low-income backgrounds at public universities and colleges across the country working to improve retention and degree completion, including Georgia State University population-specific scholarships, peer and faculty support networks, advising programs, and mentorship programs. Research has shown that targeted supports for first-generation students from low-income backgrounds can improve the likelihood that they will complete college with a degree.

**b. More robust research on retention:** We have preliminary data that suggests that many New Orleans students who start college leave without earning a degree. However, we need more research to identify *why* young people are leaving college early and what interventions help improve retention among students from our city.

### 5. Improve postsecondary data systems and access to data

**a. Commit to gathering postsecondary data:** We need centralized, citywide data on college-going and college persistence for New Orleans' youth. Many districts around the country rely upon National Student Clearinghouse data to track college enrollment and persistence among their high school graduates. Some examples from Boston and Chicago can be seen [here](#) and [here](#). One path forward would be a collaborative partnership between the OPSB, local charter management organizations, and stand alone schools, community

organizations, and research partners to access, analyze, and disseminate aggregated National Student Clearinghouse data for all of our local public school students. The current system of tracking students at the school or CMO level fails to generate a clear picture of the existing ecosystem, while relying exclusively on state-level data overlooks students who attend college out of state or at private in-state institutions. We will not be able to monitor change, growth, or impact over time without accurate and holistic data.

**b. Develop a collaborative, city-wide data system for monitoring and tracking non-traditional college students and students at non-traditional colleges:**

Many of the existing data sources either: 1) track students who have a “seamless transition” to college, or 2) report aggregated data by cohort (e.g. the total number of associates degrees awarded in a given year). However, many postsecondary students do not meet this criteria and therefore, are not easily captured through existing measures. Furthermore, an increasing number of community partners in New Orleans are developing alternative or “hybrid” colleges, wherein students can earn degrees through online courses at their own pace. It is crucial for these programs to build data collection and monitoring systems in the early stages of their development to track students and their outcomes. It’s equally important for alternative college programs to integrate their data systems to gain a holistic understanding of the students they are serving and their city-wide impact.

**6. Address racial inequities within employment and higher education organizations:**

**a. Recruit and retain diverse students and employees:**

Employers should intentionally focus on recruiting and retaining workers from diverse backgrounds for all positions. Research shows that hiring discrimination often occurs due to a series of conscious and unconscious biases in the recruitment and job placement process.<sup>16</sup> Institutions of higher education should focus on recruiting and retaining workers *and* students from diverse backgrounds and historically underrepresented groups.

**b. Address systems that perpetuate inequity:**

Many of the trends identified in the economic and educational data on young people in New Orleans can be seen across age groups in our city and in communities across the country. Without addressing the systems, policies, and practices that perpetuate racial and economic inequity, it’s unlikely that any meaningful change can be made. There are a number of local trainers who work with organizations who want to actively address issues of racial inequity. However, training effectiveness depends on the specific training method used and the personality characteristics of those involved.<sup>17</sup>

16. Baert, S. (2018). *Hiring discrimination: an overview of (almost) all correspondence experiments since 2005*. In *Audit studies: Behind the scenes with theory, method, and nuance* (pp. 63-77). Springer, Cham.

17. Bezrukova, K., Spell, C. S., Perry, J. L., & Jehn, K. A. (2016). *A meta-analytical integration of over 40 years of research on diversity training evaluation*. *Psychological Bulletin*, 142(11), 1227-1274.

# Appendix: A Note on Data Sources

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This appendix provides an overview of the data sources used for this executive summary and the accompanying website. A full methodology is available online.

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## Education Data

The education data presented in our analysis was sourced from a number of local, regional, and national datasets. Enrollment data on New Orleans public high schools and some college enrollment data was gathered from the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE). College enrollment and persistence data is from the LDOE, the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), and the Louisiana Board of Regents (BOR). The most recent NSC data we have on New Orleans students is from 2016. The BOR data only covers public in-state institutions, both two-year and four-year, and only includes enrollment data, not persistence data. Data on institutions of higher education was gathered from the U.S. Department of Education's [College Scorecard Dataset](#) and the Integrated Postsecondary Data System (IPEDS).

The unique structure of New Orleans' public education system provides unique challenges when comparing school-level data over time. We try to provide contextual information in every instance to clarify the data for the reader. However, we fall short of providing a truly holistic explanation of the wide range of changes that have occurred in New Orleans' public education landscape over the past decade.

Additionally, the data in this executive summary and the website is descriptive and intended to provide straightforward and digestible baseline data on New Orleans youth and their educational and economic outcomes. For a more robust analysis of the impact of education reforms on college persistence in New Orleans, see

Harris and Larsen's recent publication on the topic, *What Effect Did The New Orleans School Reforms Have on Student Achievement, High School Graduation, and College Outcomes* (2018). For overall benchmark data on the hospitality and tourism industry in New Orleans specifically, see the [Data Center's 2018 report, Benchmarking New Orleans' Tourism Economy: Hotel and Full-Service Restaurant Jobs](#).

## Economic Data

All demographic and economic data in this summary and on the website is sourced from Emsi, an analytics company that centralizes and analyzes national and regional datasets on the labor market, higher education, and demographic indicators. As Emsi gathers and aggregates data from a number of national datasets, there are some limitations in how we can access and organize this information. One area where this impacts our data is with age range. For example, some Emsi datasets allow analysis of age ranges from 14–18, while others are limited to 15–19. This is due to the different ways government agencies group age ranges. As a result, we combine aggregated groups and report economic findings on young people aged 14–24 to ensure that we capture all young workers in the city. While these technical issues can make direct comparisons more difficult, they are unavoidable limitations of the available data. A full list of Emsi's datasets can be found at their website, along with detailed explanation of their methodology. All economic data used in this report is from 2018.





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**The mission of the Cowen Institute is  
to advance public education and youth  
success in New Orleans and beyond.**