

## ARTICLES

# Capturing Complexity in Youth Career Planning: A Mixed Methods Perspective

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Keywords: mixed method, questionnaire development, cognitive testing, youth and young adults, military, career planning

<https://doi.org/10.29115/SP-2026-0013>

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## Survey Practice

Vol. 21 Special Issue, 2026

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This study employs an interdisciplinary, mixed-methods design to advance understanding of the economic, social, and cultural factors shaping career decision-making among U.S. youth and young adults. Using a phased approach, we combined qualitative interviews, iterative survey pretesting with a nationally representative panel of teens and young adults, and the planned implementation of a large-scale national survey of individuals aged 18–30. This design integrates qualitative depth with quantitative breadth, enabling identification of key influences on educational and occupational pathways, including higher education, trade certification, and military service. Initial findings reveal strong preferences for financial stability, work–life balance, and flexibility, alongside ambivalence toward higher education and limited engagement with military careers. These insights informed instrument refinement and sampling strategies for a forthcoming nationally representative survey, laying the groundwork for longitudinal research and policy interventions that align with youth priorities and address evolving labor market dynamics.

## Introduction

Youth and young adults today face complex career decisions amid economic uncertainty, rapid technological disruption, and shifting social norms as they navigate their futures. Labor market volatility, automation, and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have heightened concerns about job stability and the value of higher education. At the same time, career pathways are diversifying, with options ranging from college degrees to trade certifications and apprenticeships to military service. Most prior studies emphasize structural factors (e.g., sex, race, socioeconomic status, family influence) but lack integrated models, nationally representative data, and youth-centered perspectives—particularly in the context of post-pandemic labor market disruptions and evolving influences such as social media (Faberman et al. 2022; Hobijn and Şahin 2023; Sampson et al. 2018). These methodological limitations are particularly salient for understanding subgroups that are underrepresented in conventional surveys, such as those less likely to pursue higher education or those considering non-traditional career paths.

The current project seeks to enrich understanding of the propensity of youth and young adults to pursue higher education, trade certification, and/or to enlist in the military as well as individual, economic, and social/familial factors that influence their career aspirations. The project addresses many of the aforementioned gaps, including using nationally representative data, centering youth voices, and integrating multiple theoretical frameworks to guide data collection.

This article demonstrates how an integrated, phased mixed methods design can enrich understanding of youth and young adult career and educational decision-making, including a special focus on military career paths. By combining qualitative interviews, iterative survey pretesting, and a nationally representative survey, the study explored how personal values, social influences, and perceived opportunities and barriers shape career trajectories. The integration of qualitative and quantitative data across project phases allowed us to uncover insights about young people's decision-making that would have been obscured in a purely quantitative design, such as the role of social media narratives in shaping perceptions of military service, critical life milestones driving decision-making, and attitudes among young people regarding the value of education and particular career paths.

Our approach draws on psychological theories such as the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen 1991; 2012) and theories of motivation (e.g., Bandhu et al. 2024), which emphasize the role of attitudes, perceived control, and goal orientation in shaping behavior. We also incorporate economic theories of human capital accumulation to understand how young people weigh costs, benefits, and long-term returns when considering career paths, including military service. Qualitative interviews were analyzed using grounded theory and ethnographic decision models (Bernard 2017; Birks and Mills 2015).

Beyond substantive findings, this study advances methodological practice by illustrating rigorous sampling, instrument design, and analytic strategies that emerged from the integration of qualitative and quantitative data across phases. These include the use of ethnographic decision models to inform questionnaire development, cognitive testing embedded within qualitative interviews, and the application of subjective probability elicitation in the national survey to capture career expectations on a granular scale. The phased design also enabled iterative refinement of survey items based on real-time feedback, improving clarity and reducing measurement error. Collectively, these methodological contributions underscore the value of mixed methods research for addressing challenges in coverage, nonresponse, and construct validity in studies of complex social phenomena such as career-decision making.

## Data and Methods

This study employs a multi-phase mixed methods design to examine educational and career decision-making among youth and young adults in the United States. Each phase was implemented using complementary qualitative and quantitative strategies to ensure both depth and breadth of insights.

### *Research Design: Multi-Phase Mixed Methods Approach*

#### **PHASE 1: QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION**

The first phase aimed to generate rich, contextual insights into how young adults navigate career and educational decisions and to inform survey instrument development for subsequent phases. One round of semi-structured interviews was conducted with 40 young adults aged 18–30, purposively sampled for demographic and geographic diversity (see Appendix [Table A1](#) for a breakdown of the participants' characteristics). Hour-long interviews were held virtually, recorded with consent, and analyzed using grounded theory and inductive coding techniques to identify emergent themes. Ethnographic decision models were used to map decision-making pathways. Findings guided questionnaire design, including refinement of constructs and incorporation of subjective probability measures. For instance, the initial set of interviews revealed youth tended to prioritize flexibility, autonomy, and work-life balance in career choices and perceived military service as rigid and combat-focused. These insights prompted the team to include additional questions in the Phase 2 interview guide, probing whether military service across branches aligns with respondents' lifestyle and values.

#### **PHASE 2: ITERATIVE SURVEY TESTING AND QUALITATIVE VALIDATION**

The second phase focused on testing survey constructs, validating and further exploring qualitative themes, and refining items for the national survey. Using NORC's AmeriSpeak® probability-based panel, a web-based survey was administered to 1,424 teens and young adults aged 13–30, assessing educational background, employment history, job priorities, career planning, and perceptions of military service. Panelists were representative of the country based on sex, race, ethnicity, Census region, and residing within a metropolitan area. The sample was split into three age groups to aid in interpretation of the results: 13-17, 18-23, and 24-30. Quantitative analysis included descriptive statistics and subgroup comparisons by key demographic groups of interest (e.g., age, sex). Appendix [Table A2](#) includes the demographic characteristics of the surveyed panelists. Phase 2 also included 59 additional hour-long qualitative interviews with young adults aged 18-30 who completed the AmeriSpeak survey to cognitively test survey items and explore additional constructs of interest, building upon the Phase 1 qualitative interviews to gather more nuanced information to guide survey

content (see Appendix [Table A3](#) for a breakdown of the participants' characteristics). Mixed methods results informed item revisions for Phase 3. For example, the interviews conducted in Phase 2 incorporated probes on trusted sources and social media influence, reflecting insights gleaned from the Phase 1 interviews. Then, in construct testing, survey items asked which social media platforms were most influential and perceived as trustworthy.

### **PHASE 3: NATIONAL SURVEY**

The third phase, to be carried out in 2026, will produce generalizable estimates of educational and career decision-making patterns among young adults and examine predictors of career trajectories, including military service propensity. A nationally representative survey of 3,000 young adults aged 18–30 will be administered using a web-push, address-based sampling design leveraging USPS delivery sequence files and adaptive recruitment strategies to maximize coverage and response rates. Questionnaire content will incorporate lessons from earlier phases, including refined measures and innovative approaches such as subjective probability elicitation to capture expectations on a granular scale.

#### ***Analytic Approach***

Qualitative interviews underwent coding using inductive coding techniques such as grounded theory, following a systematic and iterative process. The coding was used to identify key concepts and categories. Quantitative analyses included reviewing descriptive statistics, subgroup comparisons, and regression modeling. Integration of qualitative and quantitative results was achieved using joint displays and iterative instrument refinement, enhancing the interpretability of the data.

### **Results**

#### ***Methodological Gains***

The methodological gains from using the mixed methods approach included leveraging qualitative insights to identify gaps in existing measures—such as misconceptions about military roles and nuanced views on work-life balance—while broadening the assessment framework based on interviewee input. These insights informed the integration of innovative approaches including subjective probability elicitation for career expectations and improved survey item usability through pretesting using quantitative research grounded in the interview narratives. Additionally, the study incorporated perspectives from young individuals, particularly those less likely to pursue higher education based on their self-reported percent chance of earning a 4-year college degree, to better understand career and educational decision-making within this understudied group.

## ***Substantive Findings***

### **PRELIMINARY QUALITATIVE RESULTS**

Phase 1 interviews revealed that youth tend to place a strong emphasis on job characteristics such as fair, livable wages and flexible work environments, a trend confirmed in Phase 2 where work-life balance, financial stability, and career advancement opportunities emerged as top priorities. Rather than adhering to traditional notions of career loyalty, young people value flexibility, autonomy, and financial security. Interviews suggested that military service was generally perceived as rigid and misaligned with personal values. Interviewees' openness to military service increased when the interviewer presented framed military roles around community aid. These findings were confirmed in Phase 2 with a large majority of youth not actively thinking about military service as a career option and most reporting no contact with military recruiters or military websites in the past year.

In addition, according to the interviews, social media and networking play a critical role in shaping career perceptions and opportunities. Interviewees reported using social media platforms to research careers and expressed frustration with the difficulty of securing entry-level positions without connections. Ambivalence toward higher education was also evident, driven by concerns over cost and uncertain returns, leading many to favor short-term planning over long-term educational commitments.

### **PRELIMINARY QUANTITATIVE RESULTS**

The analytic sample included 1,424 youths and young adults aged 13 to 30 who participated in the AmeriSpeak pretest panel survey. The sample was evenly split by sex, with 49.5% identifying as men and 50.5% as women. Participants were distributed across three age groups: ages 13–17 ( $n=420$ ), ages 18–23 ( $n=463$ ), and ages 24–30 ( $n=541$ ). Approximately 50% were non-Hispanic White, 12.5% Black, 26% Hispanic, and 4% Asian American and Pacific Islander. Regional representation includes respondents from the South (36.8%), Midwest (27.6%), West (24.2%), and Northeast (11.4%), reflecting broad geographic diversity. The majority of respondents (86.2%) reside in metropolitan areas, and nearly 90% live in households with internet access.

Preliminary findings from the AmeriSpeak pretest highlight strong educational aspirations among youth and young adults, coupled with concerns about affordability and mixed confidence in achieving long-term goals. While most respondents believe that higher education leads to better employment outcomes—82% rated this belief above “about half the time”—financial barriers remain a dominant concern, with 74% agreeing that family resources may limit college access. Career planning tends to focus on short-term priorities, such as earning income or completing school, and confidence in pursuing future careers is divided: roughly one-third feel

confident, one-third uncertain, and one-third lack confidence. Youth overwhelmingly expect to be working in five years (median likelihood of 90%), yet confidence in completing a four-year degree is polarized, and interest in trade pathways is relatively low.

Employment-related attitudes underscore the importance of economic security and flexibility in job selection. Nearly 90% of respondents rated financial factors as important, and 88% emphasized work-life balance, while 85% prioritized professional advancement opportunities. Ethical alignment also matters, with 79% valuing organizational mission and social impact. Military service, however, is rarely anticipated: the average likelihood of service is 13%, and most respondents (66%) report less than a 10% chance of serving. Although 62% acknowledge that military service can lead to good jobs, direct exposure to recruiters or Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) programs is limited, and trust in official military websites far exceeds other sources. These patterns suggest that while youth value stability, growth, and purpose in employment, military careers remain peripheral to their planning.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Using a mixed-methods approach proved highly valuable by uncovering latent constructs and contextual factors that a purely quantitative design would have missed. Iterative qualitative input strengthened questionnaire development, reducing measurement error and improving clarity. This approach also enabled triangulation of findings, enhancing validity and interpretability. Importantly, insights from the qualitative phase informed the sampling design for the upcoming national survey, ensuring inclusion of populations less likely to pursue higher education.

These findings underscore important implications for researchers, demonstrating that integrated mixed-method designs can effectively address persistent methodological challenges such as nonresponse and item relevance. By combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, researchers can improve engagement with hard-to-reach populations and ensure that survey instruments are both meaningful and accessible, ultimately enhancing data quality and representativeness.

Building on this mixed-methods foundation, future research could extend beyond cross-sectional insights to longitudinal tracking of youth and young adult career trajectories, including specialized career tracks such as joining the military. By integrating qualitative depth with quantitative breadth, subsequent studies can examine how evolving economic conditions, social media influences, and institutional outreach shape decision-making over time. Methodologically, the survey instruments developed here—including subjective probability measures and constructs informed by ethnographic decision models—offer a strong platform for refinement and replication in

larger, nationally representative samples. These tools can be adapted to assess emerging factors such as influencer-driven narratives and digital recruitment strategies, providing actionable evidence for policymakers and organizations seeking to engage young adults in meaningful career pathways. Ultimately, this work lays the groundwork for targeted interventions and policy innovations that align with youth priorities for flexibility, financial security, and purpose-driven employment.

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### ***Disclaimers***

This work was conducted under Cooperative Agreement #W911NF-24-2-0223 with the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences. The views, opinions, and/or findings contained in this paper are those of the authors and shall not be construed as an official Department of the Army position, policy, or decision, unless so designated by other documents.

### ***Acknowledgement***

We extend our deepest gratitude to the youth and young adults who generously shared their time and perspectives throughout this study. Their insights were invaluable in shaping our understanding of career decision-making and military propensity. We also thank the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences (ARI) for funding this research and for their collaboration and expert guidance throughout the project. The contributions of the ARI team, Stefanie Shaughnessy, Alex Wind, Peter Wang, Kate Ciarlante, and Alex McKay, were instrumental in advancing both the methodological rigor and the substantive relevance of this work.

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Submitted: November 21, 2025 EDT. Accepted: March 15, 2026 EDT. Published: August 23, 2026 EDT.



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## Appendix

Table A1. Phase 1 Participant Demographics

| Characteristics                                   | Number of Participants |
|---------------------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Sex                                               |                        |
| Male                                              | 18                     |
| Female                                            | 21                     |
| Other                                             | 1                      |
| Age Group                                         |                        |
| 18-19                                             | 10                     |
| 20-23                                             | 17                     |
| 24-30                                             | 13                     |
| Live now or in the past near military base        |                        |
| Yes                                               | 12                     |
| No                                                | 21                     |
| Don't Know                                        | 7                      |
| Race/Ethnicity (not mutually exclusive)           |                        |
| American Indian or Alaska Native                  | 1                      |
| Asian                                             | 5                      |
| Black or African American                         | 13                     |
| Hispanic or Latino                                | 9                      |
| White                                             | 19                     |
| Percent chance of earning a 4-year college degree |                        |
| 0                                                 | 10                     |
| 10                                                | 2                      |
| 20                                                | 3                      |
| 30                                                | 1                      |
| 50                                                | 7                      |
| 60                                                | 1                      |
| 65                                                | 1                      |
| 80                                                | 1                      |
| 90                                                | 2                      |
| 100                                               | 11                     |

Table A2. Phase 2 AmeriSpeak Panelist Demographics

| Characteristics                                     | N    | %     |
|-----------------------------------------------------|------|-------|
| Sex                                                 |      |       |
| Male                                                | 705  | 49.51 |
| Female                                              | 719  | 50.49 |
| Age Group                                           |      |       |
| 13-17                                               | 420  | 29.49 |
| 18-23                                               | 463  | 32.51 |
| 24-30                                               | 541  | 37.99 |
| Metropolitan Status                                 |      |       |
| Non-Metro                                           | 196  | 13.76 |
| Metro                                               | 1228 | 86.24 |
| Region                                              |      |       |
| Northeast                                           | 162  | 11.38 |
| Midwest                                             | 393  | 27.6  |
| South                                               | 524  | 36.8  |
| West                                                | 345  | 24.23 |
| Race/Ethnicity                                      |      |       |
| Non-Hispanic White                                  | 724  | 50.84 |
| Non-Hispanic Black                                  | 178  | 12.5  |
| Non-Hispanic Other, 2+ Races                        | 87   | 6.11  |
| Hispanic                                            | 374  | 26.26 |
| Non-Hispanic Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) | 61   | 4.28  |
| Internet                                            |      |       |
| Non-internet household                              | 151  | 10.6  |
| Internet household                                  | 1273 | 89.4  |
| Housing                                             |      |       |
| Owned or being bought by you or someone             | 771  | 54.14 |
| Rented for cash                                     | 585  | 41.08 |
| Occupied without payment of cash rent               | 68   | 4.78  |
| Income                                              |      |       |
| Under \$10,000                                      | 77   | 5.41  |
| \$10,000 to under \$20,000                          | 101  | 7.09  |
| \$20,000 to under \$30,000                          | 136  | 9.55  |
| \$30,000 to under \$40,000                          | 115  | 8.08  |
| \$40,000 to under \$50,000                          | 118  | 8.29  |
| \$50,000 to under \$75,000                          | 243  | 17.06 |
| \$75,000 to under \$100,000                         | 204  | 14.33 |
| \$100,000 to under \$150,000                        | 220  | 15.45 |
| \$150,000 or more                                   | 210  | 14.75 |
| Marital Status                                      |      |       |
| Married                                             | 169  | 11.87 |
| Divorced                                            | 16   | 1.1   |
| Separated                                           | 14   | 0.98  |
| Never Married                                       | 805  | 56.53 |
| (not asked if <18)                                  | 420  | 29.49 |

Table A3. Phase 2 Qualitative Participant Demographics

| Characteristics                         | Number of Participants |
|-----------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Sex                                     |                        |
| Male                                    | 9                      |
| Female                                  | 11                     |
| Age Group                               |                        |
| 18-19                                   | 3                      |
| 20-23                                   | 8                      |
| 24-30                                   | 9                      |
| Urbanicity                              |                        |
| Rural                                   | 3                      |
| Urban                                   | 17                     |
| Region                                  |                        |
| Midwest                                 | 7                      |
| Northeast                               | 2                      |
| South                                   | 10                     |
| West                                    | 1                      |
| Race/Ethnicity (not mutually exclusive) |                        |
| Other/Multiracial                       | 3                      |
| Asian                                   | 1                      |
| Black or African American               | 1                      |
| Hispanic or Latino                      | 2                      |
| White                                   | 13                     |
| Family Military Service                 |                        |
| None of Family                          | 7                      |
| Some of Family                          | 12                     |
| Most of Family                          | 1                      |
| Friend Military Service                 |                        |
| None of Friends                         | 11                     |
| Some of Friends                         | 8                      |
| Most of Friends                         | 1                      |
| Percent Chance R Will Serve in Military |                        |
| Zero                                    | 8                      |
| Less than 50                            | 10                     |
| More than 50                            | 2                      |