

According to the Urban Libraries Council (ULC), public libraries are essential community anchors where young people can find connection, purpose, and access to opportunity. Across the U.S., nearly **4.5 million youth ages 16–24** are not in school or working. These “opportunity youth” face systemic barriers, including poverty, trauma, and involvement in the criminal justice system. Libraries are helping to close these gaps by offering **paid work experiences, job skills training, and supportive mentorship**, particularly for youth who are too often left behind.



*Annual Internship Fair, Columbus Metropolitan Library*

## Libraries Build Skills, Confidence, and Belonging

Building on their longstanding role as centers for learning and access to books, libraries now serve as **trusted community spaces that equip young people with skills, connect them to critical resources, and expand their opportunities for future success**. Programs include:

- Resume and interview workshops
- Opportunities for mentorship and leadership
- Wraparound supports, including transportation, meals, and referrals to mental health and other community services
- Soft skill development (communication, time management)

## How Libraries Are Creating Youth Opportunities

ULC, the premier membership association representing North America’s leading urban public libraries, launched the [\*Creating Youth Opportunities \(CYO\) initiative\*](#) to address the urgent need to re-engage “opportunity youth,” young people ages 16–24 who are neither in school nor employed, by leveraging the trusted role of public libraries as welcoming spaces that connect young people to the relationships, resources, and pathways essential for workforce and career success.

Through this initiative, **11 ULC member libraries designed and piloted evidence-based models to engage opportunity youth** and expand their access to workforce pathways and employment. Examples include:

### Columbus Metropolitan Library (Ohio)

Columbus Metropolitan Library hosts an **annual Internship Fair connecting 1,000 young people with 60 employers**, bi-monthly career presentations at library and partner sites, and **summer career support for 1,000 teen volunteers and interns** focused on resumes, applications, and career research.

### Cedar Rapids Public Library (Iowa)

Cedar Rapids Public Library partnered with IowaBIG to deploy **programs focused on topics such as social capital** (i.e., opportunities derived from social relationships) and introduced youth to **alternative education and employment** opportunities. The library also hired a young person, identified as an opportunity youth, to help facilitate this program throughout the summer.

### Memphis Public Libraries (Tennessee)

Memphis Public Libraries hosted a **Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning series** geared toward opportunity youth and adults. The classes were intensive 4-week sessions on various themes to address personal and professional development, including **small business development, language learning, and skill development**.

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## National Impact

With the right support, opportunity youth can thrive.

- The average **disconnected youth in the U.S. costs \$37,450 annually** in government services, according to Measure of America.
- A **10% rise in youth employment** is associated with **lower violent crime rates, higher graduation rates**, and stronger, more connected communities.

## What Is Needed

To expand the impact of libraries on youth employment and opportunity, the following actions are essential:

- **Stronger government partnerships** that fully integrate libraries into city and county youth workforce strategies.
- **Dedicated and sustained public funding** to support paid library internships, apprenticeships, and other workforce programs that engage young people directly.
- **Coordinated cross-sector collaboration among libraries, workforce boards, justice systems, and youth-serving organizations** to create seamless pathways from learning to employment.