

Powering Workforce Resilience in the Age of AI: The Case for AmeriCorps

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States labor market stands at a precarious inflection point, distinct from previous industrial transitions. We are witnessing the early stages of a structural decoupling between economic productivity and entry-level human labor, driven principally by the rapid adoption of generative artificial intelligence (AI) and automation technologies. While headline economic indicators often suggest stability or "soft landings," granular data reveal a verifiable and accelerating displacement crisis specifically targeting workers under the age of 25. The "first rung" of the traditional career ladder—the entry-level roles in administration, data analysis, customer service, research, and coding that historically served as professional development for novice professionals—is being systematically digitized, automated, and the roles are being displaced.

This white paper argues that the answer to this displacement is not to attempt to "out-code" the algorithms or to create entirely new, untested government programs and agencies from scratch. Instead, one key component of the solution lies in maximizing and rigorously modernizing an existing, bipartisan infrastructure: AmeriCorps. For three decades, AmeriCorps has functioned as a decentralized engine of national service - focused on serving local communities. Today, it can be reimagined not just as a vehicle for service, but as one of the nation's primary workforce development vehicle for the "human-centric" skills that AI cannot replicate and will be vital for the future of work: dialogue and discourse, community building, metacognition, and cross-functional teamwork. Alongside other strategies to achieve a resilient economy in the age of AI which requires a coordinated national framework like the America's Talent Strategy that establishes frameworks for portable reskilling credentials and short term financing opportunities like Workforce Pell to provide workers with the financial agility to pursue new credentials. Simultaneously, state-level initiatives must leverage regional industry partnerships and community college systems to deliver localized, agile training programs that bridge the gap between legacy skill sets and the emerging demands of an AI-driven labor market.

By analyzing current labor market data, we demonstrate that the displacement of the under-25 demographic is not a temporary cyclical downturn but a permanent structural shift. AmeriCorps, with its network of 2,000 organizations across 40,000 locations and proven 17:1 return on investment, offers the most viable, scalable, and politically durable mechanism to bridge the gap from learning to work. This report outlines a comprehensive strategy to maximize national service into a critical career pathway that builds the cognitive and social resilience necessary for the AI economy by recognizing the urgent need for multiple pathways into the workforce given the rapidly-changing economy and leveraging the bipartisan support that has sustained the agency and its programs across multiple administrations.

Verified Economic Displacement in the Under-25 Demographic

The narrative of the current economic moment is often one of low unemployment and labor resilience. However, this aggregate view obscures a localized recession affecting the youngest cohort of the American workforce. The entry-level job, a fixture of the post-WWII economic contract, is disappearing. This is not merely a hiring slowdown; it is a fundamental erasure of the tasks that formerly constituted the early years of many careers.

The Data of Displacement: A Structural, Not Cyclical, Shift

While the broader economy shows unemployment rates hovering near historic lows, the data for Generation Z paints a divergent and alarming picture. As of July 2025, youth unemployment among those aged 16 to 24 reached 10.8%, significantly higher than the general unemployment rate.¹ This 10.8% figure is not an anomaly but a trend line. It represents an increase from 9.8% in July 2024, indicating a year-over-year degradation in youth labor market attachment.² This trend is further echoed in job postings: entry-level postings in the U.S. dropped by 35% between January 2023 and June 2025.³ This creates a stark bifurcation in the labor market: stability for mid-career professionals and precarity for new entrants.

The specific nature of this displacement confirms that it is technologically driven. Historically, automation targeted "blue-collar" or routine manual labor. The current wave of AI, however, targets "white-collar" cognitive labor—specifically, the rote information-processing tasks assigned to junior employees. Bloomberg Research indicates that AI is poised to replace 53% of market research analysts' tasks and 67% of sales representatives' tasks.⁴ Crucially, the displacement risk for managerial roles remains relatively low (9–21%), indicating that AI is eating the bottom of the ladder.⁵

This phenomenon is distinct from previous economic downturns. In a typical recession, hiring slows across the board. In the current AI-infused economy, we are seeing a targeted hiring freeze that is effectively permanent for specific sectors. In the technology sector, job postings have plummeted 36% from their peak, with entry-level roles vanishing faster than senior roles.⁶ Companies are not necessarily firing existing junior staff; they are simply ceasing to hire new ones, opting instead to use AI tools to augment the productivity of their senior staff.⁷ This invisible firing creates a crisis of access. According to Ravio's 2025 Tech Job Market Report, entry-level hiring plummeted by 73% compared to previous years. This sharp decrease is driven by economic uncertainty, companies favoring lean operations, and AI automating tasks typically handled by junior employees. This structural erasure of the entry-level tier means that the traditional mechanism for skill acquisition—learning by doing workforce tasks—is broken.

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Table 1: Displacement Risk by Role Seniority⁸

Role Level	Primary Tasks	AI Automation Risk	Trend Analysis
Entry-Level	Data entry, basic coding, summarization, first-tier support	High (50%+)	Tasks are algorithmic and rules-based; easily replicated by LLMs.
Mid-Level	Project management, client relations, complex synthesis	Moderate (20-30%)	AI serves as an augmentation; productivity increases, but headcount slows.
Senior/Executive	Strategic decision making, high-stakes negotiation	Low (<10%)	High reliance on "human" judgment, accountability, and nuance.

The data further illustrates that this impact is not evenly distributed. The displacement is hitting "white-collar" administrative and analytical roles hardest—sectors that were previously considered safe havens for college graduates. Roles such as market research analysts and sales representatives are facing task automation rates of over 50%.⁹ Conversely, roles requiring physical presence or complex human interaction remain more resilient, though even these are changing. The hollowed-out middle of the labor market is now extending downward to the bottom rungs, removing the stepping stones that allowed workers to climb.

The Demographic Disparity: Women and First-Generation Graduates

The burden of this structural shift is not borne equally; it falls disproportionately on women and first-generation college graduates, threatening to reverse decades of progress in social mobility and workforce equity.

For women, the threat is concentrated in the very sectors that have historically provided a pathway to the middle class. Women are disproportionately represented in administrative, clerical, and support roles—the "back office" functions that generative AI automates most efficiently.

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Based on an analysis of GenAI exposure data (using Goldman Sachs' AI economic impact data), researchers at the University of North Carolina's Kenan-Flagler Business School found that 79% of working women in the U.S. hold jobs at high risk of automation, compared with 58% of men.¹⁰ In high-income economies, the disparity is even starker: women are nearly three times as likely as men to work in roles facing severe disruption (9.6% vs. 3.5%). As AI takes on tasks in scheduling, data entry, and basic communication, the administrative stepping stone at the entry level is crumbling, leaving female entrants with fewer entry points into the corporate world.

First-generation college graduates face a different, but equally severe, penalty. Unlike their peers, who may inherit professional networks, first-generation graduates rely heavily on entry-level jobs to build social capital and learn professional norms through observational learning. As these entry-level roles disappear, so does the mechanism for catching up. The impact is already visible in hiring data: first-generation graduates receive an average of just 0.64 job offers upon graduation, compared to 0.88 for their peers.¹¹ By automating the entry-level tier, the market is inadvertently automating the barriers to entry, locking out those who lack the pre-existing networks to bypass the resume queue.

The Rise of the "NEET" and the Cost of Disconnection

The immediate downstream consequence of this displacement is the rise of the "NEET" population - young people Not in Employment, Education, or Training. In 2024, approximately 12% of 16- to 24-year-olds fell into this category.¹² By some estimates, global youth unemployment remains elevated at 13%, and while global unemployment rates are stabilizing, the recovery has lagged for young people, particularly in low-income regions.¹³ This disconnection is not merely a personal tragedy; it is a fiscal time bomb for the country.

Research indicates that a single disconnected youth imposes a lifetime burden on taxpayers of approximately \$258,240 (adjusted for inflation), and a total social cost of over \$700,000.¹⁴ For example, in Cuyahoga County, Ohio alone, the aggregate negative economic impact of disengaged youth was estimated at \$927 million per year.¹⁵ These costs arise from a combination of lost tax revenue, increased reliance on social safety nets, and higher rates of involvement with the criminal justice system.

The fiscal argument for intervention is therefore mathematical, not just moral. If AI permanently erodes the private sector's capacity to absorb and train entry-level workers, the public sector must provide an alternative mechanism for workforce attachment. Leaving this demographic to drift results in compounded costs. When a young person spends their early twenties disconnected from the labor force, their lifetime earnings potential is permanently scarred, reducing their future tax contributions and economic consumption. The "NEET" crisis is thus a macroeconomic drag that requires a structural solution.

The "Hollowed Out" Growth and Apprentice Model

The most profound implication of AI displacement is the breaking of the mentorship and development model - the idea of apprenticing. For centuries, early professional expertise was transferred through the completion of low-stakes, repetitive tasks. A junior lawyer reviewed contracts to learn the structure of an agreement; a junior coder wrote basic scripts to understand syntax; a junior marketer collated data to understand consumer trends.

AI can now perform these tasks instantly and often more accurately than a novice. Software development offers a stark example: AI can write and fix code faster than a junior developer. Customer service chatbots do not take sick days or require benefits. Routine data entry, reporting, and scheduling are increasingly automated.¹⁶ While this boosts short-term efficiency for corporations, it severs the developmental pathway for workers. If a junior employee never struggles with the "grunt work," they never develop the intuitive, deep knowledge required to become a senior expert.¹⁷

The private sector, driven by efficiency and shareholder returns, lacks the incentive to pay humans to do what software can do for free or at a fraction of the cost. This creates a classic market failure: Employers are desperate for senior talent with complex problem-solving skills, yet they are destroying the very mechanisms that produce it. The market is failing to produce the public good of "trained workers" because the process of training-by-doing has been automated. **This necessitates a public intervention—not to subsidize useless work, but to prioritize meaningful scaffolds for skill acquisition and development. We must build an enhanced "first rung" insulated from automation pressure and focused on the skills that will remain distinctly human.**

The Psychological Toll of Displacement

Beyond the economic data, there is a palpable psychological impact on the emerging workforce. They are not paranoid; they are paying attention. Surveys indicate that 49% of Gen Z job hunters believe AI has reduced the value of their college education.¹⁸ This anxiety is compounded by a labor market that feels increasingly closed off.

When 40% of employers expect to reduce their workforce due to automation before 2030,¹⁹ the signal to young workers is that they are surplus to requirements. This erosion of confidence can lead to disengagement and a complete withdrawal from the labor force, further fueling the NEET crisis. A response that focuses on community, connection, and tangible impact—like AmeriCorps—can serve as a powerful antidote to this technological alienation while providing the skills and experience needed for higher-level workforce entry.

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Moving from Information Processing to Human Connection

If the entry-level economy of the past was built on information processing, the entry-level economy of the future must be built on human connection. As AI commodifies intelligence and output, the premium on strictly human attributes—metacognition, dialogue, empathy, and community building—skyrockets. These are not merely "soft skills" to be listed at the bottom of a resume; they are the only durable currency in an automated labor market.

Metacognition and the "Human-in-the-Loop"

In an era where answers are cheap, the ability to ask the right question becomes the primary value driver. This requires metacognition—the ability to think about one's own thinking, to evaluate the provenance of information, and to regulate cognitive strategies.²⁰

AI models, essentially "black boxes" of statistical probability, require human handlers who possess high levels of critical interpretation and verification skills.²¹ A worker must be able to look at an AI-generated output and ask: "Does this align with the community's needs? Is this biased? Is this contextually accurate?" This requires a level of judgment developed not through textbook study but through experiential learning in complex, real-world environments.

Service learning has been empirically proven to enhance metacognitive abilities. Research indicates that students who participate in service-based learning demonstrate clearer strategic planning skills, better differentiation between useful and superfluous information, and a deeper understanding of client needs compared to those who do not serve.²² Service forces the individual to confront novel situations with no "textbook" answer, thereby building the cognitive flexibility that AI currently lacks. In a service environment, an error has real-world consequences for a beneficiary, teaching the learner a profound lesson in verification and responsibility that a classroom simulation cannot replicate.

Discourse, Dialogue, and the Democratic Muscle

AI can generate text, but it cannot engage in genuine dialogue—the reciprocal exchange of ideas that builds shared meaning and trust. As our digital lives become increasingly curated by algorithms that reinforce existing biases, the ability to engage in civil discourse with people from different backgrounds is atrophying.

Many AmeriCorps programs, by design, place members on diverse teams with members from a range of backgrounds. This immersion forces the development of dialogue skills, including listening, perspective-taking, and negotiation.²³ These are the prerequisites for conflict resolution and leadership in a polarized society.

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The United Nations International Labour Organization (ILO) notes that while AI may replace routine tasks, it enhances the value of interpersonal and life skills.²⁴ A future career ladder will not be climbed by processing spreadsheets faster, but by navigating complex human systems—such as healthcare, education, or disaster recovery—where empathy and trust are the operational constraints. The "human touch" in banking, for example, has shifted from transaction processing to relationship management.²⁵ AmeriCorps provides the training ground for young professionals navigating this shift by placing members in roles where interpersonal connection is the primary deliverable, while also providing benefits to communities that could not be achieved by AI.

"AmeriCorps launched my career with the federal government as a Museum Technician for the National Park Service. My service helped me develop professional skills and contacts that prepared me for the workforce and encouraged my confidence and growth."

-Lauren R., AmeriCorps alum

Cross-Functional Teamwork in a Siloed World

The modern workplace is increasingly cross-functional, requiring collaboration between technical and non-technical stakeholders. However, educational institutions remain largely siloed. National service can offer a corrective experience.

AmeriCorps NCCC (National Civilian Community Corps) teams, for example, live and work together for 10 months, tackling diverse projects from forestry to disaster response to community revitalization.²⁶ Similarly, AmeriCorps State and National members serve for an extended period with a host nonprofit in a local community, working on human-centered projects ranging from education, to food security, to youth mental health, and more. This environment acts as a pressure cooker for teamwork skills. Members must navigate group dynamics, resource scarcity, and shifting priorities—precisely the "messy" human variables that AI cannot simulate. This experience builds "civic muscle," a transferable skill set that applies as much to a corporate boardroom as it does to a town council meeting. The examples of AmeriCorps in action—detailed throughout this paper—vividly illustrate the workplace skills traditionally honed in entry-level roles. As these roles increasingly disappear due to automation, AmeriCorps serves as a vital proof point for its "double bottom line": it provides the essential, human-centric skills that AI cannot replicate, while also benefitting local communities. By filling the void left by vanishing entry-level positions, AmeriCorps builds the professional foundation necessary to navigate and lead in an AI-driven world.

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“Beyond the construction skills, learning how to teach and problem-solve were my biggest takeaways—and I carry those lessons with me to this day.”

-Brett D’Antonio, AmeriCorps NCCC alum — now CEO, Habitat for Humanity SKKC

Effective cross-functional collaboration requires communication, strategic thinking, and the ability to bridge departmental or cultural divides.²⁷ By working in diverse teams to solve tangible community problems, AmeriCorps members develop these skills organically. They learn to function as a cohesive unit, leveraging individual strengths to achieve a common goal, which is a capability that is highly prized in the modern, agile workforce.

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“The training I got in YouthBuild led straight to my job in the trades.” — YouthBuild alum

The Teamwork Dividend: Market Demand for Conflict Resolution Skills and Civil Discourse

The ability to navigate diverse cultural landscapes and engage in robust, civil discourse is no longer merely a civic virtue; it is a verifiable market asset. 77% of employers report requiring at least a year of experience for entry-level jobs, yet most do not offer internships, apprenticeships, or other programs that provide early-career experience.²⁸ More than nine in 10 (93%) parents say schools are preparing their young adults for the workforce, but 52% of employers say there is a mismatch between school curricula and the skills their industries need.²⁹ The inability to resolve conflicts arising from different backgrounds, perspectives, and worldviews has become an operational risk for the private sector. Recent data from the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) indicates that workplace incivility and political polarization cost US businesses billions annually in lost productivity and absenteeism.³⁰

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AmeriCorps programs offer a unique training ground for this capability. National service often places members in communities—and on teams—that are socioeconomically, racially, and politically diverse. AmeriCorps data reveal that 93% of members report increased confidence in interacting with people from different backgrounds after their service.³¹

“I did not expect to entirely change my career aspirations, but that’s what TFA does; the corps exposes you to different opportunities, communities, and ultimately challenges your beliefs.”
—Yesenia Castro, Teach For America alum and current School Leader, KIPP SoCal Public Schools

Table 2: The Shift in Essential Workforce Skills³²

Traditional Entry-Level Skill (Declining Value)	Emerging "Human-Centric" Skill (High Value)	How Service Builds This Skill
Rote Information Retrieval	Critical Interpretation & Verification	Members must evaluate real-world data (e.g., disaster damage assessments, student academic data) where accuracy has human consequences.
Standardized Reporting	Complex Dialogue & Discourse	Members must communicate with diverse stakeholders (beneficiaries, government officials, and community stakeholders) to achieve consensus.
Siloed Individual Contribution	Cross-Functional Collaboration	Teams (e.g., NCCC) may live and work together, requiring constant negotiation and collective problem-solving. Service with nonprofits often requires members to build consensus among a range of stakeholders (e.g. employer, school, students, teachers, and parents) to produce results.
Process Compliance	Metacognition & Adaptability	Service environments can be unpredictable; members must constantly adjust strategies based on changing on-the-ground realities.

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The "Soft Skills" Misnomer: Durable Skills for a Digital Age

The research highlights a shift in terminology. "Soft skills" are increasingly being referred to as "durable skills" or "power skills." The ability to navigate ambiguity (metacognition) and build consensus (dialogue) is no longer "nice to have"—they may become among the only things left that AI cannot do reliably.³³ AmeriCorps programs are essentially a gymnasium for these skills.

Employers increasingly value these attributes. Alumni of City Year, an organization that places teams of AmeriCorps members serving as student success coaches in under-resourced schools to support students while developing the next generation of leaders, for example, are recognized for their ability to practice compassion, empathy, and resilience—traits that are difficult to screen for but essential for organizational health.³⁴ An independent study of City Year alumni also found that a year of diverse, team-based national service builds core workplace skills, such as creative problem-solving, leadership, and the ability to work across differences, which alumni carry into their careers.³⁵ The outcomes across these two studies closely align with the 2025 World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report, which identifies analytical and creative thinking, resilience and adaptability, leadership and social influence, and empathy as among the most critical skills for the workforce of the future.³⁶ By consistently ensuring that national service provides participants with a "durable skills academy," we can align the program with the most pressing needs for our workforce and economy in the age of AI.

"City Year was the first real full-time job I had, and I was 23 at the time. In addition to the mentoring, projects and service we did for the community, City Year helped me mature and grow to the point where I could succeed in my future jobs. Honestly, the year helped me grow up and learn how to be a good employee, good team member and how to be a professional. I realized that I had to be responsible for my actions and that if I was on time, followed the rules and gave 100%, I could channel my energy into helping people.

After serving I got a job as an office manager and I would never have made it had I not spent the previous year learning how to both manage myself and projects. Unfortunately while working in the office, I felt utterly empty and unfulfilled because I was not doing service which I came to love. So I became an EMT and joined FDNY! I felt the spirit, discipline, purpose and pride again helping my community. I spent many years working EMS in the South Bronx which is where I served with City Year. I am now a paramedic instructor at our training academy so finally, I am teaching again and I feel like my service has come full circle."

-City Year New York Alum

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The Strategic Case for AmeriCorps as the Lynchpin

In addressing the rapidly growing crisis of early employment displacement, policymakers face a choice: either build a new national apparatus to manage training and placement, or maximize existing infrastructure. The data overwhelmingly support the latter. AmeriCorps, often overlooked in high-level economic strategy, possesses the scale, the legal framework, and the bipartisan DNA to serve as a "lynchpin" for this transition.

The Infrastructure Advantage: A Ready-Made Network

AmeriCorps is not a start-up. It is a mature federal agency with a network of over 2,000 nonprofit and public-sector program partners, 40,000 locations, and a workforce of 250,000 members and volunteers annually.³⁷ It has established pipelines into the very sectors where human needs are highest, and AI displacement is lowest: education, public health, disaster response, and environmental stewardship. This means the roles it fills will remain in demand and could even grow. Rather than competing for scarce private-sector roles, AmeriCorps leverages its mature infrastructure to funnel talent into high-need public sectors like disaster response and public health where human intervention remains indispensable. By focusing on these AI-resistant fields, the agency serves as a non-competitive bridge that supplements the labor market rather than displacing existing commercial jobs.

Creating a new government entity or national infrastructure to address youth unemployment would require years of legislative wrangling, rule-making, and logistical setup. AmeriCorps already has the grant-making machinery, state-level, Governor-appointed commissions, and vetting processes required to deploy thousands of young people. This "speed to market" is critical given the accelerating pace of AI adoption.

Furthermore, AmeriCorps is legally structured to support local control. Through State Service Commissions, two-thirds of federal dollars are administered by the states, allowing governors to direct resources to their specific community needs.³⁸ This federalist structure is crucial for scalability, as it avoids a "one-size-fits-all" approach. A state like Colorado can focus its corps on climate resilience and wildfire mitigation,³⁹ while a state like Michigan might focus on urban education or public health. Similarly, AmeriCorps, as part of a larger youth-serving workforce development infrastructure that also includes higher education, has the unique ability to orient young people toward growing sectors, a strong advantage in the context of AI's impact on early-career development. These flexibilities allow the program to adapt to regional economic nuances and labor market trends.

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Beyond local control, AmeriCorps' state-level infrastructure provides a ready-made, trusted platform and system of local partnerships that allow states to deploy service quickly and at scale without building new systems from scratch. That infrastructure dramatically multiplies impact by turning each federal dollar into catalytic capital, enabling states to braid in more state-level resources, including state tax credits, philanthropic capital, education, workforce, mental health, and other agency funding to grow national service as a cost-effective solution to meet priority state needs. These Governor-appointed bodies provide the essential administrative backbone that humanizes federal compliance for local nonprofits, ensuring that workforce innovation can scale rapidly without the friction of a centralized federal bureaucracy.

The Economic Argument: ROI and Efficiency

Critics of federal jobs programs often cite waste and inefficiency. However, AmeriCorps has a rigorously documented return on investment (ROI). A comprehensive study by ICF found that for every \$1 of federal taxes invested, AmeriCorps returns \$17.30 to society, program members, and the federal government.⁴⁰ This return is derived from tax revenue gains, savings in social safety net expenditures, and the direct value of services provided.

Compared to the staggering cost of the NEET population (\$927 million/year in one county), AmeriCorps represents an efficient use of public funds. It effectively serves as an early-career development program for the nation, producing both public and individual good.

Cost efficiency is also evident in the program's operational model. For example, the cost per Member Service Year (MSY) is capped, and recent budget justifications show a strategic focus on maximizing this value.⁴¹ While the agency faces challenges, including recent audit findings that require remediation,⁴² the core economic logic of the program remains sound. The high ROI suggests that, even with the necessary administrative improvements, the fundamental model delivers value far in excess of its cost.

The Upstream Impact on Economic Mobility and Workforce Readiness

AmeriCorps' portfolio of student success and education-focused programs, which account for around fifty percent of all programs, generates upstream workforce and economic-mobility impact by intervening early in the pipeline – improving the academic and attendance outcomes and character and skills that research consistently links to graduation, postsecondary success, and long-term earnings—especially for students from under-resourced schools.

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Rigorous, gold-standard research shows that the AmeriCorps program Reading Partners delivers strong, measurable gains in reading proficiency equivalent to roughly two months of additional learning, helping students build the foundational literacy skills that prepare them for long-term success in college and careers.⁴³ Evaluations of Ampact-managed AmeriCorps education programs, such as Minnesota Reading Corps, show that students receiving tutoring make statistically significant gains in foundational literacy and math skills, putting them on a stronger path to college and career success.⁴⁴ And third-party studies have found that schools partnering with City Year student success coaches are two to three times more likely to improve English and math proficiency and show gains in attendance and learning time, helping keep students on track to graduate.⁴⁵ This student-level impact creates powerful leverage for workforce development systems.

By increasing high school graduation rates, strengthening foundational skills, and improving readiness for postsecondary education and training, AmeriCorps education programs lower downstream remediation costs and strengthen talent pipelines by expanding the pool of young people prepared to enter high-demand careers. In effect, education-focused national service functions as a preventive workforce infrastructure using relatively modest public investment to unlock larger returns for states, employers, and communities.

“My Corps experience helped me figure out what I wanted to do with my life. It opened doors I didn’t even know existed and put me on a career path I’m still on today.”

—Ronald Henderson, The Corps Network alum

The Bipartisan Shield: A History of Shared Commitment.

Perhaps the most critical asset AmeriCorps possesses is its history of bipartisan commitment and support. For more than 30 years, it has enjoyed such strong support because it reflects shared values—service, civic engagement, and local problem-solving. Along with establishing Points of Light, the first demonstration grants that laid the groundwork for AmeriCorps were awarded during the George H.W. Bush administration. President Clinton established the AmeriCorps agency, bringing all of the nation’s domestic service programs under one roof, including those created during the Nixon and Johnson administrations. AmeriCorps was sustained through bipartisan collaboration in the 1990s led by Senators Orrin Hatch, Edward M. Kennedy, and John McCain.⁴⁶ In recent years, it has been championed by bipartisan leaders, including Republicans such as Reps. Tom Cole, Hal Rogers, Senators Bill Cassidy, Susan Collins, and Shelly Moore Capito, and Democrats such as Rep. Rosa DeLauro and Senators Tammy Baldwin, Chris Coons, Patty Murray, and Jack Reed.⁴⁷

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Even when faced with existential threats, such as proposed budget cuts or elimination, Congress—led by bipartisan caucuses—has consistently restored funding.⁴⁸ This durability stems from the program's structure: it is not a federal bureaucracy expanding into local life, but a federal grant program that empowers local faith-based groups, non-profits, and charities.

Conservative arguments for national service emphasize that it fosters citizenship, reduces reliance on the welfare state by building work skills, and leverages private philanthropy.⁴⁹ By understanding AmeriCorps as a workforce development tool rather than a social service program, policymakers can tap into a deep reservoir of bipartisan support that would be extremely difficult to build for a new "Federal Jobs Guarantee" or universal basic income. The Heritage Foundation's "National Independent Panel on Military Service and Readiness" report, while critical of some aspects of military politicization, underscores the conservative value placed on readiness and service.⁵⁰ Leveraging AmeriCorps to focus on workforce readiness aligns with these values.

"I powered through those gritty first six months of learning and development and landed an internship with my dream company, Microsoft."

-Nico Cargo, Year Up United alum

Addressing the Critics: Investing in the Agency's Internal Audit and Oversight Capacity

It is essential to acknowledge and address the criticisms leveled at the agency to build a robust case for expansion. Recent reports have highlighted challenges with financial management and audit risk.⁵¹ Critics point to these issues as evidence of waste.

AmeriCorps grants operate under some of the most rigorous oversight requirements in the federal grant system, including detailed financial reporting, independent single audits, Inspector General investigations, and strict federal compliance standards. Local grantees are regularly monitored and held accountable for performance, and when issues are identified, corrective actions and financial remedies are enforced. In practice, the nationwide network of AmeriCorps partners has consistently demonstrated strong stewardship of federal funds while delivering measurable results for communities and a very strong ROI for taxpayers.

The agency has acknowledged the need for more robust investment in antiquated systems and staff capacity. By coupling increased investment with rigorous oversight and modernized data systems, the agency can answer its critics while enabling the scale of evidence-based local programs.

PART IV: THE VERIFIABLE SHIFT

Case Studies of AmeriCorps as a Workforce Accelerator

The theoretical potential of AmeriCorps as a workforce engine is already being validated by innovative programs on the ground. These "edge cases" demonstrate how the service year can be transformed into a high-tech apprenticeship.

1. The Digital Service Fellows (Philadelphia)

The Urban Technology Project in Philadelphia utilizes the AmeriCorps chassis to address the tech skills gap directly. The Digital Service Fellows program recruits recent high school graduates to provide tech support and digital literacy training in schools.⁵²

- **The Model:** Fellows receive a living stipend (\$22,000) and an education award, but crucially, they also receive industry-recognized certifications (Google, Apple, CompTIA) and on-the-job apprenticeship hours.⁵³
- **The Outcome:** This transforms the service year from a "gap year" into a "pre-apprenticeship." It provides the verifiable experience that employers demand but entry-level jobs no longer provide. It effectively bypasses the "broken rung" by creating a protected environment for skill acquisition. The program serves "opportunity youth"—those not in school or work—demonstrating its capacity to reach the most vulnerable segments of the labor market.⁵⁴

2. Code for America & The Safety Net Innovation Lab

AmeriCorps has partnered with organizations like Code for America to place technologists in government to modernize social safety nets.⁵⁵ While typically for more senior fellows, this model proves that national service can be a mechanism for digital transformation.

- **The Insight:** By integrating AmeriCorps members into state governments (e.g., Maryland, Illinois) to digitize SNAP and Medicaid applications, the program solves two problems: it modernizes government services (saving tax dollars), and it trains a cadre of civic technologists who understand how to apply AI and digital tools to complex public sector problems.⁵⁶ This partnership model showcases how national service can drive systemic change while building the workforce of the future.

3. Youth Mental Health Corps

AmeriCorps, in partnership with state service commissions and with catalytic support from the Schultz Family Foundation and private-sector partners such as Pinterest, has launched the Youth Mental Health Corps as a state-led national service initiative to address the youth mental health crisis.

PART IV: THE VERIFIABLE SHIFT

Through this model, state commissions support AmeriCorps programs that deploy young adults as near-peer mental health navigators in schools and community-based organizations, tailored to local needs and workforce gaps.⁵⁷

- **The Insight:** By leveraging existing state AmeriCorps infrastructure—governor-appointed commissions, formula funding, and cross-agency partnerships—the Youth Mental Health Corps solves two structural challenges simultaneously. First, it expands access to trusted, school-based mental health supports in states facing severe provider shortages by embedding AmeriCorps members where youth already are. Second, it enables states to intentionally build a behavioral health workforce pipeline through paid service, stackable credentials, and education awards aligned to state workforce priorities, while preparing the next generation of behavioral health professionals.

4. New York Empire State Service Corps

New York launched the Empire State Service Corps in 2024, aiming to create 1,500 service positions, leveraging AmeriCorps funding. This initiative focuses on civic engagement, education, economic opportunity, environmental stewardship, public health, and veterans' outreach.⁵⁸

- **The Strategic Alignment:** This program explicitly connects service to high-demand fields such as teaching. By engaging State University of New York students, it integrates service into the higher education experience, reinforcing the service learning model that builds metacognitive skills. It serves as a prime example of how state institutions can innovate to meet local needs.⁵⁹

5. City Year Career Pathways: From National Service to High-Demand Careers in the Age of AI

City Year, like many programs, is designed to turn a year of service into long-term economic mobility for its student success coaches—the majority of whom are from low-income backgrounds (52%), with half (49%) first-generation college students. City Year has built a national career pathways strategy that intentionally connects AmeriCorps service to post-service employment in high-demand fields. During their year of service, young adults explore their sense of purpose and belonging, engage in career-connected learning, and gain access to accelerated credentials, social capital, and career advising—core elements of research-based Purposeful Pathways. The results are compelling: more than 90% of City Year alumni say City Year prepared them for their careers; 83% credit City Year with developing their durable skills; and 74% are currently earning the same as or more than their parents, contributing to generational economic mobility.⁶⁰

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Through employer partnerships like the Deloitte Career Catalyzer—a structured pathway connecting City Year alumni to Deloitte careers, and a teacher pathways program—an on-ramp that converts service experience into a resilient teaching workforce, City Year translates service experience into durable skills and concrete career opportunities.

- **The Strategic Alignment:** As a result of their service year, durable skill development and talent pathway programs, 91% of City Year's 2020 graduates secured a job or enrolled in higher education within 12 months of service, and 89% have earned post-secondary degrees to date.⁶¹ City Year's model positions national service as a launchpad into successful careers, delivering what young people want: meaningful, on-the-job experience, and what employers need: talent equipped to build relationships, think critically, and solve complex problems. Together, these pathways show how AmeriCorps programs can function as workforce infrastructure, aligning public service with employer demand and long-term economic mobility.

PART V: THE POLICY ROADMAP

Modernizing AmeriCorps for the AI Economy and Workforce of the Future

To position AmeriCorps as a primary workforce development and reskilling strategy for meeting entry-level economic displacement and preparing Americans for the evolving workforce, Congress, the administration, and governors should modernize the program to better integrate with workforce systems, expand flexibility, and strengthen accountability. The following recommendations focus on aligning service with career pathways, removing outdated barriers, and ensuring participants gain in-demand skills and credentials.

1. Modernize the Segal Education Award

The current Segal AmeriCorps Education Award (tied to the Pell Grant value) can be used to pay for higher education expenses at any Title IV-eligible institution, including community colleges and limited job training programs, or for student loan repayment. While some flexibility exists, the education award does not fully accommodate the growing demand for short-term credentials, industry certifications, and non-traditional learning pathways. As the labor market evolves—particularly in response to AI—workers increasingly need rapid, targeted upskilling opportunities that may come from a variety of providers not just Title IV-eligible institutions. The current structure remains insufficient for a workforce that requires agile, skills-based training options that often fall outside traditional higher education models.

- **Policy Proposal:** Legislation must be passed to expand the allowable uses of the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award to include credentials, industry-recognized certifications, career pathways programs, and tools of the trade, including programs outside of Title IV institutions.⁴³ Building on the momentum of the One Big Beautiful Bill, the establishment of Workforce Pell provides the ideal legislative template for this transition by expanding Pell eligibility to high-quality, short-term training. By integrating this model, the bill ensures that federal support for workforce development becomes a sustained investment in the agile, credential-based education required to navigate an AI-integrated economy. AmeriCorps should automatically align with these expanded definitions.
- **Reasoning:** Participants should be able to use their AmeriCorps Education Award for high-quality, workforce-aligned training such as a rigorous cybersecurity bootcamp or advanced AI prompting certification.. This flexibility is essential for keeping pace with the rapid evolution of skills in the AI economy. States like Colorado have already taken steps to remove state income tax on the award, increasing its value.⁶²

PART V: THE POLICY ROADMAP

2. Exclude the AmeriCorps Segal Education Award from Federal and State Income Tax

The Segal AmeriCorps Education Award is treated as taxable income, meaning participants must pay taxes on the award in the year it is used. This reduces the effective value of the benefit and can create unexpected financial burdens, particularly for low-income participants. While some states have taken action to exclude the award from state income tax, federal and state tax treatment continues to diminish its intended impact.

- **Policy Proposal:** Exclude the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award from federal and state income tax by amending the Internal Revenue Code and state tax laws. This would align federal and state policy with a growing number of states that have already exempted the education award from state taxation, including Colorado, Oregon, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Nebraska, Iowa, and Montana. Congress has already taken steps in this direction— in 2026 Representatives Don Bacon and John Larson recently reintroduced the bipartisan “Segal AmeriCorps Education Award Tax Relief Act,” which would exclude the award from federal taxable income.
- **Reasoning:** Taxing the education award undermines its purpose as a tool for advancing education and economic mobility, often reducing its value by hundreds or thousands of dollars. Unlike other federal education benefits (such as Pell Grants and GI Bill benefits), the AmeriCorps Education Award is uniquely taxed, creating an inequitable burden on those who serve. Excluding the award from taxation would increase its real value, improve recruitment and retention, and ensure participants are not penalized for choosing national service.

3. Align AmeriCorps into the Workforce System and WIOA (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act)

Currently, AmeriCorps and the federal workforce development system (the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act or WIOA) operate in largely parallel silos, with limited coordination despite overlapping populations. This fragmentation creates missed opportunities to align funding, training, and career pathways for participants. Recent federal attention to AI workforce readiness and AI literacy highlights the need for stronger system integration to maximize the potential of both AmeriCorps and WIOA.

- **Policy Proposal:** Define AmeriCorps service formally as "work-based learning", "on the job learning" or "pre-apprenticeship" within WIOA statutes and enable AmeriCorps participants to qualify for WIOA-funded training services.⁶³ Direct federal workforce programs to coordinate with AmeriCorps to align, blend, and braid funding where allowable.

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- **Reasoning:** Integration creates seamless pathways from service to employment, allowing participants to gain both practical experience and recognized credentials. It also maximizes federal investments by aligning service and workforce systems around shared goals. A young person displaced by AI enters AmeriCorps for a year of "human skills" training, partially funded by workforce dollars, and exits with a credential recognized by the Department of Labor and employers. Today's employers want AI literacy and the ability for jobseekers to work in an AI augmented environment. Aligned with these employer needs, some AmeriCorps programs are already working to ensure that graduating members receive an AI literacy certificate, which could be a beneficial tactic to scale across all programs. Recent guidance encouraging the use of WIOA funds for AI literacy training creates a timely opening for this integration.⁶⁴

4. Remove AmeriCorps Barriers to Professional Development

Current regulations limit the proportion of time AmeriCorps members can spend in training and professional development, capping it at 20 percent for most members, with a waiver lifting the cap to 50 percent, in limited circumstances. This rule is outdated, difficult to administer, and inconsistent with modern workforce development practices.

- **Policy Proposal:** AmeriCorps' "80/20" regulation requires that at least 80 percent of a member's time is spent in direct service, while a maximum of 20 percent may be spent on education and training activities, with waiver lifting the cap to 50 percent, in limited circumstances. This rule should be repealed, or the cap should be raised to at least 50 percent across all programs, allowing greater flexibility for training and professional development activities.
- **Reasoning:** Removing this restriction enables programs to better prepare participants with in-demand skills while reducing administrative burden and audit risk. Modern workforce development requires integrated learning, not arbitrary limits on training time.

5. Enable Public-Private Workforce Partnerships

The AmeriCorps statute currently prohibits activities that directly benefit for-profit entities, limiting opportunities for participants to engage with private sector employers. This restriction prevents programs from offering internships, training placements, and other workforce-relevant experiences.

- **Policy Proposal:** Modify the prohibition to allow partnerships with for-profit entities when activities support participant professional development or provide a clear public benefit.

PART V: THE POLICY ROADMAP

- **Reasoning:** Engaging employers is essential to aligning service with real workforce needs. Carefully structured partnerships can expand training opportunities without compromising AmeriCorps' public mission.

6. Establish an AmeriCorps Workforce/Apprenticeship Corps

AmeriCorps programs are increasingly incorporating workforce development elements, but existing rules around living allowances, cost caps, and uniform compensation structures limit alignment with federal and state registered apprenticeship models.

- **Policy Proposal:** Create a Workforce/Apprenticeship AmeriCorps model that allows flexible compensation structures, alignment with apprenticeship wage and hour requirements, and recognition of service and training hours across systems.
- **Reasoning:** This model would enable high-quality earn-and-learn opportunities and better integration with registered apprenticeships, expanding pathways to employment in high-demand sectors.

7. Support Seamless Transitions from Service to Employment

Current AmeriCorps rules do not treat accepting employment as a valid reason for early exit from service, potentially discouraging participants from pursuing job opportunities. This creates tension between program completion and career advancement.

- **Policy Proposal:** Allow AmeriCorps members to exit service early for employment after completing a substantial portion of their term, with eligibility for a prorated education award.
- **Reasoning:** AmeriCorps should accelerate entry into the workforce, not delay it. Supporting transitions to employment aligns the program with its workforce development

8. Establish an AmeriCorps Credential (The "Human Corps" Certification)

The private sector struggles to verify "soft skills." AmeriCorps should develop a standardized credential for the skills developed during service, such as metacognition, cross-cultural dialogue, and crisis management. By formalizing these competencies, AmeriCorps can provide a trusted third-party validation for the foundational human skills that once defined the early career ladder but are now increasingly difficult for employers to identify in an automated screening environment. This standardized credential can translate service experience into clear labor market signals, helping employers understand the value of AmeriCorps participation and formalizes the "human" curriculum.

PART V: THE POLICY ROADMAP

- **Policy Proposal:** Develop a "National Service Credential" issued by the agency, utilizing digital badging to verify the specific competencies gained.
- **Reasoning:** If an employer sees "AmeriCorps" on a resume, they should know exactly what skills that represents, just as they know what a Python certification represents. This formalizes the "human" curriculum.

9. Strengthen Workforce Development as a Core AmeriCorps Outcome and Invest in Data Systems and Long-Term Outcomes Tracking

AmeriCorps performance measures are primarily focused on community impact rather than economic mobility indicators. While grantees often provide workforce development opportunities, there is no standardized way to measure or report these outcomes across the system. AmeriCorps also lacks robust longitudinal data systems to track participant outcomes over time, limiting the ability to assess long-term impacts on employment and earnings.

- **Policy Proposal:** Establish workforce development as a formal AmeriCorps impact goal and create national performance measures tracking participant outcomes such as credentials earned, professional development completed, and employment placement. Invest in updated IT systems, including a modern data infrastructure that links service participation to workforce outcomes, including wage and employment data (similar to the "SWIS" data system used in workforce development).
- **Reasoning:** Standardized workforce metrics and strong data systems that demonstrate long-term economic impact are essential for capturing AmeriCorps' full value, improving program design, strengthening the case for continued investment, and maintaining bipartisan support.

CONCLUSION: THE SAFE HARBOR FOR HUMAN POTENTIAL

The age of AI brings with it a paradox of abundance and scarcity: an abundance of synthetic intelligence and a scarcity of pathways for human development. The "invisible firing" of the under-25 demographic is not a glitch; it is a feature of the new economic operating system. If we do not intervene, we risk creating a permanent "lost generation" of NEETs, disconnected from the economy and the nation's civic fabric.

We do not need to look for a silver bullet in the form of a new, untested bureaucracy. The solution is hiding in plain sight. Utilizing the existing AmeriCorps infrastructure avoids the inefficiency of creating an untested federal bureaucracy or forcing 50 individual states to build redundant administrative systems from scratch. As a proven national model with established state-level commissions, AmeriCorps offers a unique "best of both worlds" solution: a unified federal standard for AI-era workforce development that maintains the local flexibility and customization required to meet regional labor market needs. AmeriCorps, with its bipartisan pedigree, national footprint, and high ROI, is the ideal infrastructure to serve as the lynchpin of our response.

By maximizing AmeriCorps as a workforce development engine for the human-centric skills of the future—discourse, dialogue, and metacognition—we can turn the displacement crisis into an opportunity for renewal. We can build a workforce that is not competing with AI, but is uniquely human, resilient, and connected. The infrastructure exists; the data supports it; the history validates it. All that is required now is the political will to modernize it.

TABLES AND DATA SYNTHESIS

Table 3: AmeriCorps Economic Impact vs. Cost of Inaction

Metric	Value	Source
Cost per Disconnected Youth (Lifetime)	~\$258,000 (Fiscal) / ~\$700,000 (Social)	Belfield, Clive R., Henry M. Levin, and Rachel Rosen. The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth. Washington, DC: Corporation for National and Community Service, 2012. https://rte21.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/2012-The-Economic-Value-of-Opportunity-Youth.pdf .
AmeriCorps ROI (Federal)	\$17.30 return for every \$1 invested	Voices for National Service. "AmeriCorps and Senior Corps: Quantifying the Impact." July 15, 2020. https://voicesforservice.org/research-and-reports/national-service-produces-171-return-on-investment/ .
Youth Unemployment Rate (July 2025)	10.8%	U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Employment and Unemployment among Youth Summary." News release, August 21, 2025. https://www.bls.gov/news.release/youth.nr0.htm .
General Unemployment Rate	~4.4%	U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Unemployment Rate 4.4 Percent in February 2026." TED The Economics Daily, March 16, 2026. https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2026/unemployment-rate-4-4-percent-in-february-2026.htm .

This table illustrates the stark cost-benefit analysis. The cost of leaving a young person as a "NEET" dwarfs the cost of an AmeriCorps service year.

TABLES AND DATA SYNTHESIS

Table 4: Policy Modernization Matrix

Current Constraint	Proposed Modernization	Expected Outcome
Segal Award Restrictions	Expand to non-Title IV institutions or industry credentials (JOBS Act alignment)	Increases utility for non-college-bound youth; aligns with "skills-based hiring."
Siloed Funding	Integration with WIOA "Work-based Learning"	Unlocks Dept of Labor funds for service programs; streamlines entry into trades.
Poverty-Level Stipend	Index to 200% Poverty Line or Living Wage	Increases diversity of corps; reduces barrier to entry for low-income displaced workers.
Lack of Credentialing	"National Service Credential" (Digital Badging)	Provides employers with verified proof of "soft skills" (leadership, grit, teamwork).

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