



# STAR Barriers and Breakthroughs

A Framework to Improve STAR Economic Mobility

**STARs**<sup>\*</sup>  
SKILLED THROUGH  
ALTERNATIVE ROUTES

 Opportunity  
@ Work.



# STARs experience barriers and achieve breakthroughs as they navigate the workforce

Over the past 20 years, **STARs**, workers who are Skilled through Alternative Routes instead of a bachelor's degree, have experienced declining economic mobility. This trend is often ascribed to a lack of skills and a need for further training and education. But this explanation belies the facts and ignores the many systemic barriers that STARs encounter in the labor market.

The **STAR Barriers and Breakthroughs Framework** offers a way to understand the STAR experience and expand opportunities for STAR mobility. It reflects the lived experiences of the hundreds of STARs who have shared their stories with Opportunity@Work. While each story is unique, the data shows that their overall experience is consistent. STARs bring skills, capabilities and motivation to the workforce, but as they navigate the labor market, they manage constraints on time, resources, and access that limit their options. Any serious effort to improve economic mobility for STARs must take into account the assets they bring to the market and the barriers that hinder their progress.

**STARs** are the 70+ million workers who have gained skills on the job, through military service, community college or other alternative routes. STARs are over 25, active in the workforce, and have a high school diploma.

## THE STAR BARRIERS AND BREAKTHROUGHS FRAMEWORK IDENTIFIES SIX CONTRIBUTORS TO STAR MOBILITY



## STARs encounter a constellation of barriers as they seek good jobs

A STAR's trajectory in the workforce is rarely linear because their choices are limited in all sorts of ways. STARs shared the following examples.



Family and work commitments compete for time to pursue networking, job searches, and training.



Expenses like childcare, housing, and student debt take precedence over investments in training.



Lack of access to transportation and technology limits job options.



Exclusionary practices like degree screens create a paper ceiling that puts some jobs off limits to STARs.



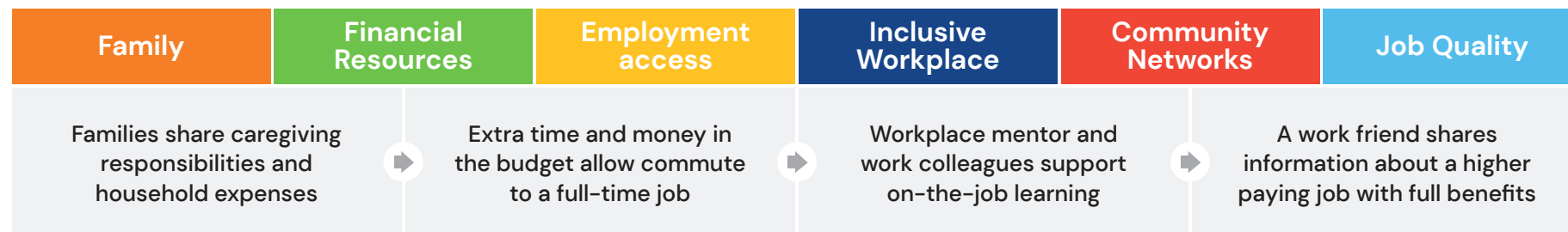
Social connections offer access to a narrow set of jobs.



Jobs offer low pay, irregular hours, and limited opportunities for professional growth.

## And yet, STARs achieve breakthroughs

STARs leverage the assets they have got to make headway in the labor market. Here is just one example.



## Imagine millions more STAR breakthroughs

Over 3 million **Shining STARs** have achieved high-wage jobs despite the barriers. More than 30 million **Rising STARs** are poised to make a transition to a higher wage job today if we remove the barriers on their job pathways. And another 30+ million **Forming STARs** are showing up to work and getting skills that could put them on a path to mobility if we made some smart investments in their development.

## We can make STAR breakthroughs happen at scale

This interdependent system points to many effective interventions. STARs will be free to demonstrate their full potential if we:

- Recognize that STAR mobility has multiple systemic drivers
- Expand the conversation about effective workforce interventions
- Engage a full coalition of workforce stakeholders in the effort
- Invest time and resources in systemic change

**STARs are already showing us the way.**

## THE STAR BARRIERS AND BREAKTHROUGHS FRAMEWORK OFFERS MANY WAYS TO MULTIPLY BREAKTHROUGHS



## STAR Story

# Ansaer is the kind of person who always finds a way.

When one door closes, he finds another. He was a bright student who was accepted to a top tier university, but when he recognized the stress that the tuition costs would place on his family, he decided to find another way. He started working and began taking classes at the local community college.

This approach proved challenging. Working three jobs while going to school made for a round-the clock schedule. His housing situation was unstable and sleep was hard to come by. One night, driving from his overnight job to his day job, he got vertigo and nearly crashed his car. This is when he knew he had to make a change. He decided to join the U.S. Navy.

When he completed his service, Ansaer wanted to apply the skills that he developed in the military to the tech sector. He enrolled in YearUp, a tuition-free job training program, to hone his technical skills and connect to employment opportunities. He woke up every day excited for training. Personal circumstances caused him to leave the program for a year, but he persevered and re-enrolled. He credits family and friends for supporting him through that period and the coaches at YearUp for encouraging him to stay the course and welcoming him back to the program.

Upon graduation from YearUp, Ansaer started an internship as a QA Engineer at a large tech company. Industry layoffs disrupted his plan to transition to a full time role, so he is looking for another job and contemplating a second stint in the military. He knows that across his experiences, from his early entry level jobs, his experience in the military, YearUp and his internship, he has cultivated a broad set of skills and capabilities but that finding job security is still a challenge. He believes he may have to put his passions aside for the time being to support himself. "Adversity feels like home", he reflects, as he looks at the road ahead.



## Ansaer's journey

- **family**  
Parents pushed for higher education
- **financial resources**  
High tuition costs ruled out college
- **community networks**  
Friends helped fill a housing gap
- **inclusive workplace**  
A supportive mentor encouraged growth
- **job quality**  
Three jobs at once proved too much
- **employment access**  
Layoffs closed a door and launched a new search





## STARs tell their stories

- **Family** is central to a STAR's experience in the labor market
- **Financial stability** is key to economic mobility
- **Community networks** offer information, connections, and support
- A **good job** supports earning and learning
- An **inclusive workplace** allows STARs to thrive
- **Access to jobs** expands STARs' universe of possibilities



Ali



Ansear



Barbara



Ciara



Jonathan



Katy



Lawrence



Mark



Micah



Shanel



Sharon



Sheree



Taylor



Tayshawn



# Family is central to a STAR's experience in the labor market

Intergenerational relationships and responsibilities demand time and resources but also provide motivation and support.

## Families influence job decisions and motivations

As a teenager, **Micah** often accompanied his father, a property manager, and helped out with painting, replacing carpets, and other repairs. Now, he has his own real estate business.

**Shanel** spent many hours in the kitchen with her grandmother. Now she works in a bakery where she teaches entrepreneurship to veterans.

College was never an option for **Lakisha**. Her family expected her to go straight to work.

**Barbara's** experience with her daughter's mental health challenges launched her on a career of family support.

## They provide support and encouragement

**Sandra's** parents took care of her baby while she went to school and worked.

## But they also come with responsibilities

When **Darryl's** family fell apart, he had to step up and make money to support his younger siblings.

When the pandemic shut down daycare, **Stefanie** took responsibility for her grandson's care.



## Over one-third of STARs are parents; millions more are caregivers.<sup>1</sup>

This has profound implications for how they spend their time and resources.

# 24.9M

STARs have a child under 18

These competing demands are especially acute for:

- **Young people:** 41% of STARs aged 25 to 35 are parents.
- **Single parents:** 31% of the 24M STAR parents are single parents.
- **Women:** Among working parents, STAR women spend, on average, 88 percent more time per week on childcare and household work than STAR men.



# Financial stability is key to economic mobility

When STARs have the resources to cover living expenses, housing, healthcare and other costs, they have more freedom to make job and training choices.

## Financial obligations drive job choices

When **Daquan** graduated from high school, college was not an option because he needed to provide for his family. He worked a series of service jobs in fast food and retail.

**Barbara** stayed in a low growth potential job for over a decade because it offered the income and stability she needed to take care of her family. This delayed her move to family services, where she now shines.

**Teresa** exited the workforce for several years when she had children, as the costs and demands of childcare made staying home the most logical option.

## Scarce resources limit options

**Taylor** was accepted to a public university several hours from home. Due to financial hardship, she left before completing her degree.

When **Ansaer** lost his job, he lost his housing, and this instability made it more difficult to get his next job.

## And an increase can make a big difference

For **Lakisha**, a shift from a temporary contract to full-time employee was life changing. "I had healthcare, I had a 401(k), and I was able to help my family out if they needed."



## STARs are stretching resources to make ends meet.<sup>2</sup>

This often means prioritizing basic and short term needs over investments in the future.

# 21M

STARs earn hourly wages less than 2/3 of the national median

# 34.4%

of workers with college debt are STARs

Occupational segregation means that some workers consistently earn less than others.

- **Black or Hispanic STARs** are 37% more likely to earn low wages than white STARs.
- **Women STARs** are 53% more likely to earn low wages than men STARs.





# Community networks provide information, access and support

Families, friends, teachers, and the broader community are often a STARs best source of information and connections to jobs as well as material and emotional support.

## Communities provide information and coaching

**Tayshawn** worked as a personal trainer and wanted to start his own business. He connected with trainers on social media to build relationships and learn new techniques. “There were two guys who trained exactly the same way as me. I took the time to listen to them on a daily basis.”

**Katy’s** rugby team took her under their collective wing and helped her pivot from music to medical technology. They coached her through resume building and interview preparation, and opened doors that she did not know about. “I had one or two people who sat down with me, helped me polish up my resume . . . grilled me on it and got me into interview shape.”

## Community networks open access

**John** was feeling stuck in his career, moving from one low-wage job to the next. At YearUp, he bonded with a tight-knit training group. When a member of this cohort moved on from her IT job, she recommended John for the role and he got it.

## Communities step up when people need support

When **Ansaer** found himself without a reliable place to live, family friends invited him to stay with them. This allowed him to find stable work.



## STARs describe strong community networks but they have fewer links to professional opportunities.<sup>3</sup>

This represents a gap in access to opportunity.

# 3X

STARs are 3 times less likely to have a strong professional network than workers with a bachelor’s degree

When opportunities are based on “who you know,” groups of workers who have been historically excluded continue to be excluded.

- **Workers in low-wage roles and low-income communities** disproportionately experience this form of exclusion.
- **Black workers** are less likely to receive job offers through network-based methods despite using their social networks in job seeking at similar rates to other workers.



# A good job supports earning and learning

STARs seek jobs with good wages and benefits and stable hours as well as opportunities for professional development and meaningful work.

## STARs weigh trade-offs in wages, hours, and working conditions as they navigate jobs

Service industry jobs were attractive to **Alicia** because they provided a reliable income and schedule flexibility. However, when she had a child she found the shift scheduling to be inconsistent with reliable childcare.

**Barbara** explains the challenge of working more than one job. “You can’t focus. You’re torn. You have to be in too many places. That can really get in the way.”

## On-the-job learning opportunities are especially valuable

**Sharon** noticed that firms invest mainly in their senior staff, so she sought opportunities to invest in herself. With guidance from colleagues, some training, and her own initiative, she mastered several billing and project management software programs.

**Jay** worked in fast food and retail early in their career. Across these jobs, no one took the time to teach them to use the cash register.

**Kent** did not have the time or resources for classes so he built his skills on the job. He was lucky to have an excellent supervisor who gave him opportunities to learn.

**Casey** climbed the ladder at a national retail chain, moving quickly from cashier to customer service to supervisor.



## STARs fill most low-wage, low-mobility roles.<sup>4</sup>

This has profound effects on their economic well-being and mobility.

# 68%

of workers in low-wage occupations are STARs

While STARs have demonstrated skills, more than half of STARs are stuck in roles with limited mobility.

- **39M Forming STARs** are currently building skills in occupations without clear pathways into higher-wage positions.
- **Low wages** correlate with less stable and predictable hours, less job security, fewer advancement opportunities, and less enjoyment at work.



# An inclusive workplace allows STARs to thrive

As STARs represent the full diversity of the workforce, their success is supported through equity, inclusion, and belonging, for all identities.

## STARs experience exclusion for many reasons

As a young Arab American man in the IT field, **Ali** often felt his contributions were dismissed. He started his own company where he could set the culture.

When **Cristina** moved, she was surprised to encounter racial discrimination that she had not experienced as a Latina in Miami. "I would use my boyfriend's last name to get callbacks for work."

**Julie** has decades of experience in office administration. She notes that her employers treat her as overqualified, because of her years of experience, and underqualified, for lack of a degree.

## Inclusive practices make a difference

**Jonathan** supervises people who, like him, experienced the foster care system. He believes he is a good mentor for them because he is able to connect with them.

As a culinary manager, **Mark** looks for his team's strengths. "I've had prep cooks that are hundred pounds soaking wet that can burn through a 50 pound bag of onions in 30 minutes, and they're all perfect. But you have to pick up that 50 pound bag for them because there's no way they're doing it. It's realizing that they have so many strengths, but if they have a couple of weaknesses, that's not a big deal."



## Exclusionary practices shrink the talent pool and squander STAR potential.<sup>5</sup>

Half of all STARs have the skills for higher wage work today.

# 39%

of job postings in occupations that pay median wages above \$25/hr explicitly screen out STARs

Effective efforts at diversity and equity must account for STARs.

- **Racial diversity.** STARs are overrepresented among Black workers (66%) and Hispanic workers (55%).
- **Gender diversity.** Half of STARs are women and they are well-positioned to enter occupations with low gender diversity like IT.
- **Vulnerable populations.** Barriers to work are also barriers to college, so STARs represent the majority of workers with disabilities, formerly incarcerated, rural workers, and other economically vulnerable groups.



# Access to jobs expands STARs' universe of possibilities

Transportation, technology, information, and proximity to opportunities open access to good jobs and training opportunities for STARs.

## The cost of transportation in time and money can limit choices

**Monique** is an administrative professional with 20 years of experience across multiple industries. She has the skills and adaptability to work almost anywhere but she has had to pass on jobs that were good opportunities because she did not have a car and the public transit commute was too long.

**Lawrence** needs his car to get to his facilities management job at 5 a.m. There are no buses at that hour. When his car broke down, he did not have the money to fix it. He is grateful to his father and a friend who lent him the money.

## Access to information and technology can bridge the gap

When **Darryl** was released from prison, he found it difficult to find information about available jobs, especially in his area, where there were not a lot of businesses. Ultimately, a second chance program connected him with an employer. He is now a sanitation supervisor and appreciates the stability this job provides him.

When **Ciara** had to move for family reasons, she wanted to keep her job, but the commute, despite toll roads and expressways, was grueling. She looked for jobs closer to home but there were no local opportunities in her industry. In 2020, as remote work expanded, she was able to access more jobs and improve her work-life balance.



## STARs face limits to opportunity when they cannot access the job.<sup>6</sup>

Physical and virtual access to work play a role in opening opportunities.

**12.4M**

STARs lack ready access to a computer or the internet.

**11%**

of STARs work remotely.

Lack of access to good jobs is most acute for the most vulnerable STARs and those effects compound.

- **Racial disparities:** About half the STARs with technology challenges — 7 million — are BIPOC STARs.
- **Economic disparities:** The cost burden of commuting to work for low-income workers is 6.1% compared to 3.8% for other workers.

## STAR Story

# Sheree has not given up on her dreams.

She planned to be a teacher and went to college to get an education degree. When her mother fell ill, she left school to work full time. She took a job as a claims assistant in an insurance company hoping to climb a corporate ladder. Yet, despite working nights and weekends, she was passed over for promotions. When an internal role opened up, she aced the interviews but saw it go to a less experienced candidate with a bachelor's degree.

Discouraged, Sheree took night classes and applied for new jobs. She got two competing offers — a counseling job and a job in her county social services department. While the counseling role appealed to her, she chose the government job for its stability, pay, and benefits. A mother and provider for her family, she needed the “safer” job.

The public sector provided Sheree training, professional development, and mobility opportunities she sought. She earned five promotions over 14 years, becoming an eligibility technician in the foster care system and then an employment counselor. In these roles, she managed large caseloads, navigating complex systems. Still she faced the paper ceiling. She wanted to become a social worker, but the bachelor's degree requirement, with its cost and time commitment, put this role out of reach.

When faced with possible layoffs during the pandemic, Sheree found a training program for Salesforce Administration. This opened the door to a Technical Customer Engagement role with a nonprofit. An advocate for equity and access, it was always Sheree's goal to share her new technical knowledge to help both diversify tech and close the digital divide and she is doing this in her current role at a local high school.

Sheree is proud of her achievement, noting the many barriers she cleared along the way — degree discrimination, financial strain, child care challenges, long hours and irregular work schedules. She often prioritized family needs over her own dreams but always found ways to keep learning. Still, she questions why it had to be this hard. She credits her relationships with helping her see it through.



## Sheree's journey

- **inclusive workplace**  
Passed over for promotion despite her experience
- **financial resources**  
The safer job was better for her family
- **job quality**  
The public sector offered professional growth
- **family**  
Parenting responsibilities always came first
- **employment access**  
A short training opened a new career track
- **community networks**  
Strong relationships gave her strength



# The STAR Barriers and Breakthroughs Framework has three key implications for the field

- **Workforce efforts encompass more than training and hiring.**  
STARs face a constellation of barriers as they navigate the workforce. A broader view of these barriers can foster more comprehensive and innovative solutions.
- **There are many points for effective intervention.**  
Strength in one area can expand opportunities across the framework. Stakeholders have choices about where and how to deploy their resources for impact.
- **Focus on the system rather than the individual.**  
STARs are problem solvers. They bring skills, motivation, and drive to the workforce and make breakthroughs despite systemic barriers. If we fix the system, STARs can deploy their strengths to their full potential.

IN AN INTERDEPENDENT SYSTEM,  
ONE INTERVENTION HAS BROAD IMPACT.  
Here is just one example.



In this dynamic framework, one change can affect the whole system. For example, **removal of a financial constraint** — through increased income or lower expenses — alleviates family resource restrictions and opens access to jobs, which in turn, strengthen community networks and inclusive workplaces.

# Stakeholders have many options for effective interventions



## Make family central to workforce policy and investments

### Support stable healthy families through:

- Policies and funding to support families: family leave, universal healthcare, earned income tax credit, housing subsidies
- Investments in care infrastructure: childcare, universal pre-K, eldercare, child tax credit
- Programmatic support for wraparound supports and innovative intergenerational programs



## Invest in STARs' financial stability

### Ease economic burdens through:

- Funding for financial stability such as student loan forgiveness and income supplements
- Policies for financial stability such as liveable wages, universal healthcare, tenant protections
- Programmatic support for case management and streamlining of processes



## Strengthen STARs' community networks

### Advance policies and programs that support racial and socioeconomic integration of neighborhoods and occupations:

- Support fair housing efforts and equitable funding for schools
- Pilot efforts to diversify job pathways
- Invest in job training that includes cohort building and job placement



## Improve job quality to support learning and earning

### Promote, model and enforce standards for good jobs:

- Implement policies and practices that support living wages and protect against abuses
- Establish standards for good jobs to apply to grantees, contractors, and partners
- Support grassroots efforts to elevate worker voice
- Invest in job training and work-based learning efforts



## Expand inclusive workplace practices

### Support and model inclusive workplaces:

- Model skill-first hiring in your organization
- Encourage skills-first hiring among grantees, contractors, and partners
- Fund research and pilot programs for inclusive workplaces
- Elevate worker voices in funding and policy decisions



## Invest in the infrastructure for greater access to jobs

### Strengthen transportation and information networks:

- Advocate for and invest in access infrastructure: public transit, broadband, community wifi
- Fund programs that support access: computers, libraries, transportation stipends

This work is informed by hundreds of conversations and over 70 structured interviews with STARs, interviews with stakeholders in the fields of philanthropy, public policy, and workforce development, and several human-centered design workshops.

Our study population is limited to adults aged 25 and older in the civilian, non-institutionalized labor force. This excludes active-duty military, residents of nursing homes or correctional facilities, and individuals who are not currently working or looking for work.

1. **Family.** Estimates of STAR family responsibilities are based on Opportunity@Work analysis of the 2022 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC) accessed via IPUMS. Estimates of gender differences in time use are based on Opportunity@Work analysis of the 2022 American Time Use Survey (ATUS) accessed via IPUMS.
2. **Financial Resources.** Estimates of hourly wages by educational attainment, race, ethnicity, and gender are based on Opportunity@Work analysis of the 2022 CPS ASEC accessed via IPUMS. Estimates of the college debt burden of STARs are based on Opportunity@Work analysis of the 2020 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP).
3. **Community Networks.** Estimates of the strength of STAR professional networks is based on a LinkedIn/Opportunity@Work research collaboration. (Cite Reach for the STARs – link?). The socioeconomic and racial differences in professional networks have been documented by many other researchers including Pedulla and Pager (2019) and Schmutte (2015). Estimates of the share of workers in low-wage occupations who are STARs are based on Opportunity@Work analysis of the 2022 CPS ASEC accessed via IPUMS. Low-wage occupations are defined as those with median hourly wages less than two-thirds of the national median; in 2022, this represents occupations with median hourly wages less than \$16.67.
4. **Job Quality.** Forming STARs are workers who may have the skills to move into higher-wage jobs, but are currently employed in occupations from which there are limited or less significant skills-based pathways to higher wage occupations. For a more detailed definition of Forming STARs, see the appendix of [Rise with the STARs](#). This estimate is based on Opportunity@Work analysis of the Occupational Information Network (O\*NET) 27.3 Database; 2013 to 2022 CPS ASEC; 2021 1- and 5-year American Community Survey, Integrated Public Use Microdata Series. The characteristics associated with low wages come from [this 2020 Gallup Report](#).
5. **Inclusive Workplace.** The share of job postings which screen out STARs is derived from Opportunity@Work analysis of the 2022 CPS ASEC accessed via IPUMS and Lightcast job postings data from 2023. We limit our analysis to occupations in which STARs made up more than 10 percent of the current workforce as of 2022. Estimates of racial, ethnic, and gender diversity are based on Opportunity@Work analysis of the 2022 CPS ASEC.
6. **Employment Access.** Estimates of the number of STARs with access to technology resources and the share of STARs who work remotely are based on Opportunity@Work analysis of the 1-year 2021 American Community Survey (ACS) accessed via IPUMS. The disparate cost burden of commuting to work for low-income workers comes from [this 2008 Brookings report](#).

## Additional resources

We are indebted to many scholars and journalists for foundational work that informed this framework. To learn more about the many factors that influence economic mobility, see the following resources:

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# Additional resources

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#### About Opportunity@Work

Opportunity@Work is a nonprofit social enterprise with a mission to increase career opportunities for the more than 70 million adults in the U.S. who do not have a bachelor's degree but are Skilled Through Alternative Routes (STARs). For STARs, the American Dream has been fading due in part to an "opportunity gap," in which access to the good jobs required for upward mobility often depends less on people's skills and more on whether and where they went to college, who they know professionally and socially, or even how they look. We envision a future in which employers hire people based on skills rather than their pedigree. We are uniting companies, workforce development organizations, and philanthropists in a movement to restore the American Dream so that every STAR can work, learn, and earn to their full potential.

Visit us at [www.opportunityatwork.org](http://www.opportunityatwork.org).

