

Blue-collar training in high school leaves women behind

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What's the best way to prepare high schoolers for jobs in the 21st century? Education leaders and the general public have been debating this question with more heat in recent years, clashing over whether to focus on college preparation or vocational training, especially training linked to blue-collar jobs.

The way the pendulum swings may have profound consequences for young women, according to new Cornell University research published online June 29, 2016 and which will appear in the August print issue of the *American Sociological Review*. Blue-collar training without a strong college-preparatory focus leads to blue-collar [jobs](#) for men but penalizes women in the labor market, says lead author April Sutton, a Frank H.T. Rhodes Postdoctoral Fellow at the Cornell Population Center.

"This has been a real blind spot in the public discussion: the assumption that men and women would equally benefit from high school training for local blue-collar jobs," Sutton said.

Sutton and her colleagues, Amanda Bosky and Chandra Muller, both of the University of Texas at Austin, found that high school training in blue-collar communities reduced both men's and women's odds of enrolling in a four-year college but led to different outcomes for men and women when they looked for jobs. Men in these communities enrolled in greater numbers of blue-collar-related vocational courses in high school, had higher rates of blue-collar employment and earned comparable wages relative to men who attended high school in non-blue-collar

communities.

In sharp contrast, women who attended high school in blue-collar communities were less likely to be employed at all and less likely to work in professional occupations when they were employed. They also earned far less than their female counterparts from non-blue-collar communities. Furthermore, gender gaps in employment and wages were widest among young men and women who attended high school in blue-collar communities.

These differences were partially due to high schools in blue-collar communities offering greater numbers of blue-collar related vocational courses while offering fewer advanced college-preparatory courses. Other research links advanced academic courses—such as math beyond Algebra II - to four-year college enrollment and completion. "This curricular tradeoff did not penalize men in the labor market, at least in early adulthood, but it restricted women's opportunities to get good jobs," Sutton said.

These findings deserve close attention in light of recent proposals from both sides of the political aisle aiming to reemphasize blue-collar related vocational training and recent legislation in several states bolstering blue-collar related high school training while relaxing academic graduation requirements, Sutton said.

Those women who do obtain blue-collar jobs often find themselves still on the outside looking in at high-paying blue-collar positions. Among high school graduates ages 25-28 in blue collar jobs, the hourly gender wage gap was 22 percent, with women making 78 cents for every dollar men make. "The disparity is striking for a millennial cohort of women for whom the pay gap has substantially narrowed on average," Sutton said.

The study "raises questions about how high school training for these male-dominated, local jobs would negatively impact gender inequality, and it emphasizes the importance of considering gender in debates about the best type of high school training to succeed in today's economy," Sutton said.

The researchers used data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002, a nationally representative study of [high school](#) sophomores, designed by the National Center for Education Statistics. This cohort was tracked through early adulthood with follow-up surveys conducted in 2004, 2006 and 2012. The researchers took into account differences in students' family backgrounds, achievement test scores, academic grades, school demographics and other characteristics when they compared the education and labor market outcomes of young men and [women](#) across local labor markets.

More information: "Manufacturing Gender Inequality in the New Economy: High School Training for Work in Blue-Collar Communities," *American Sociological Review*, 2016.

Provided by Cornell University

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