Employment realities don't match people's dreams
24 June 2021, by Laurie Fickman

"Results revealed that most adolescents aspired to careers with low potential for automation. However, there were large discrepancies between adolescents’ aspirations and the number of jobs available in the labor market," said Hoff.

For females, the most popular aspirations were doctors, veterinarians, teachers, and nurses. Doctor was most popular in early adolescence (accounting for around 12% of all female aspirations at ages 13-15), whereas veterinarian, teacher, and nurse were more popular in late adolescence (ages 16-18). For males, athlete was overwhelmingly the most popular aspiration during early adolescence (accounting for 22-32% of male aspirations at ages 13-15) but became less popular in late adolescence (accounting for 5-13% at ages 16-18).

"Both males and females showed a similar pattern of increasing variability in their career aspirations with age, indicating more diverse career goals," said Hoff. Indeed, reality may have set in. Many 13-year-old males who wanted to be professional athletes had changed their minds by 18 to aspire towards more attainable jobs.

One of the most important ways to help children find ambitious, yet realistic career goals is through exposing them to a variety of career types they would not naturally see in their daily lives.

"Young girls often want to become teachers because that is what they see every day," said Hoff. "It's equally important to show them that other occupations exist, especially lesser-known careers with growing employment demands, such as those in the STEM fields." Hoff said teachers often struggle with directing students who have very lofty career ambitions but mediocre grades, although there's an upside to having such ambition.

"Adolescents who want to become doctors may end up with a really good job doing something else in
the medical field, and that's a positive outcome. The negatives are they might end up working toward an unattainable career, pursuing education that's a bad fit in interest or ability," said Hoff.

Despite a rapidly changing labor market, little research exists on how youth's career goals correspond to projections about the future of work. "This kind of career development research can make a positive impact in helping individuals and societies prepare for the future of work," said Hoff.

In the end, Hoff's work does not discourage ambition, but amplifies the need for a good back-up plan.

"It's good to encourage students to have prestigious careers, but as they get older, parents, teachers or counselors should also be real with them and help them understand how many people actually work in their dream fields, and how likely it is they will get a job in that field," said Hoff.

Spoiler alert: Only 2% of Americans are employed in the arts.

Hoff's team included Drake Van Egdom, University of Houston; Alexis Hanna, University of Nevada-Reno; Chris Napolitano and James Rounds, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.