

Young Adults & the Construction Trades

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Special Study for Housing Economics

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NAHB estimates the U.S. has a [structural housing deficit](#) of 1.2 million units. This figure represents the cumulative amount of above-equilibrium construction needed to balance the housing market. Among the myriads of headwinds home builders face trying to close that gap is the industry's chronic shortage of workers in the construction trades. In [a recent survey](#), 61% of single-family builders identified the cost/availability of labor as a significant challenge they will face in 2026. At the root of this issue is the aging out of the construction labor force, where the [median age is 42](#), one year older than the typical worker in the U.S. Closing the housing deficit will necessarily entail recruiting younger workers willing to start a career in the construction trades.

This research sheds light on the attitudes of young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 toward the construction trades, and where possible, compares findings to a similar study conducted in 2016. Results are based on responses from 2,000 young adults, selected proportionately to represent their cohort in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, and region of the country.

A summary of the findings includes:

- While 65% of young adults know exactly the field in which they want to have (or currently have) a career, a non-trivial 35% remain undecided.
- Of those with a clear sense of career direction, the medical (20%), business (9%), and technology (8%) fields rank as the top three choices. Construction trades ties in fourth place at 6%, twice the 3% who planned to work in the trades in 2016.
- The most important benefit of a career in the construction trades is good pay (73%).
- Of those still undecided about career plans, 51% are reluctant to consider a career in the trades regardless of pay. That share is down from 63% in 2016. On the contrary, 30% would likely give the trades a second thought if compensation were high enough. Only 18% would have done so a decade ago.
- When the group most reluctant to consider a career in the trades was asked if any compensation level might make them reconsider, just under half (48%) confirmed they would not accept a career in the construction trades at any level of compensation. But a majority of 52% would be willing to reconsider that position for the right paycheck. That figure is at least \$90,000 for 32%

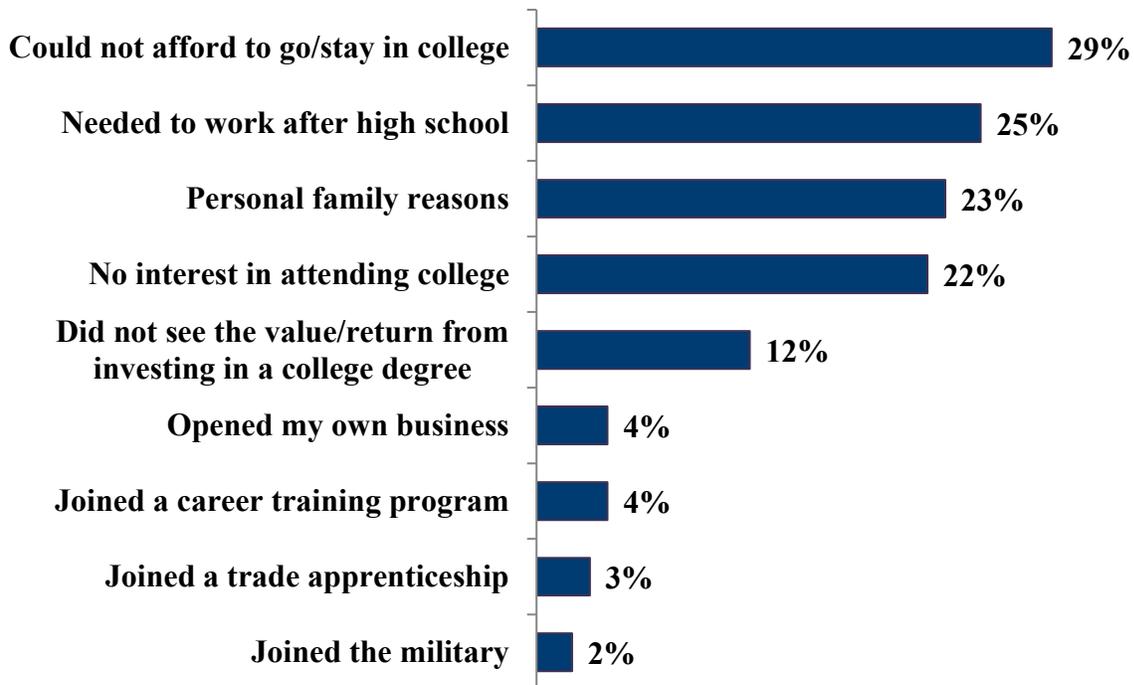
of this group, and \$60,000 to \$80,000 for the other 20%. Twelve trade occupations already meet or exceed that threshold.

Why Not Pursue a 4-Year College Degree

Young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 without a bachelor’s degree who are not currently in college were asked about the reasons for not pursuing or finishing a 4-year college degree. The most common explanation is costs, as 29% cite being unable ‘to afford to go/stay in college.’ Going beyond tuition, 25% say they ‘needed to work after high school,’ 23% cite ‘personal family reasons,’ and 22% declare to have ‘no interest in attending college.’ These explanations are often interconnected, as demonstrated by the fact that many young adults selected multiple reasons for not pursuing a 4-year college degree.

Far less important explanations for why young adults are not pursuing a bachelor’s degree include not seeing the value/return from investing in a degree (12%), or they opened their own business (4%), joined a career training program (4%), joined a trade apprenticeship (3%), or joined the military (2%) (Exhibit 1).

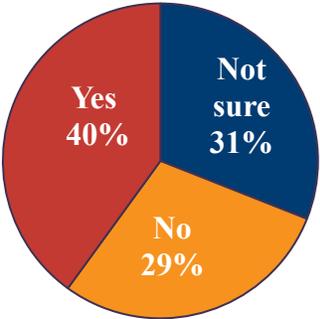
**Exhibit 1. Why Not Pursuing 4-Year College Degree
(Percent of Respondents Not Pursuing 4-Year degree)**



Understanding the future plans of young adults *not currently* in college is one way to measure the slice of this cohort potentially available for a different career path, such as joining a construction

trade. According to this research, only 40% of young people between the ages of 18 and 25 without a 4-year degree and not currently in college have plans to attend or return to college later. In contrast, a majority of 60% either have no such plans (29%) or simply are not sure (31%) (Exhibit 2). This 60% segment is arguably the cohort of young people being sought after by industries with chronic labor shortages, such as construction, transportation, and warehousing.

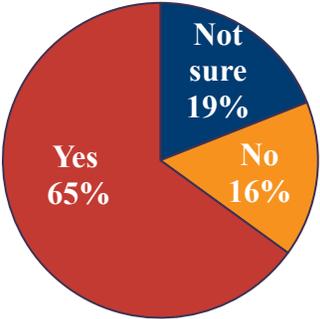
**Exhibit 2. Planning to Attend/Return to College Later
(Percent of Respondents Not Pursuing 4-Year degree)**



Most Know Career Field They Want, but a Rising Share are Uncertain

All young adults in the study were asked whether they knew the field in which they want to have (or currently have) a career. While roughly two out of every three (65%) know exactly what that field is, a non-trivial minority of 35% either does not know (16%) or is not sure (19%) (Exhibit 3). The answers do not vary significantly across gender lines, race/ethnicity, community type (urban, suburban, rural) or region of the country: 30% to 40% of young adults consistently across these groups are uncertain about the field in which they want to start a career.

**Exhibit 3. Do you know field you want a career in (or currently have)?
(Percent of Respondents)**



Compared to 2016, current findings indicate that certainty about career choice has declined. A decade ago, 74% of young adults between 18 and 25 already knew the field where they wanted to work. In 2026, that share is nine percentage points lower, at 65%. The drop is likely associated with broader economic uncertainty and changing labor market dynamics that led, for example, to the creation of only [181,000 jobs in 2025](#), the weakest year for employment growth outside of a recession year (2008, 2009, and 2020) since 2003 (Exhibit 4).

**Exhibit 4. Do you know field you want a career in (or currently have)? - History
(Percent of Respondents)**

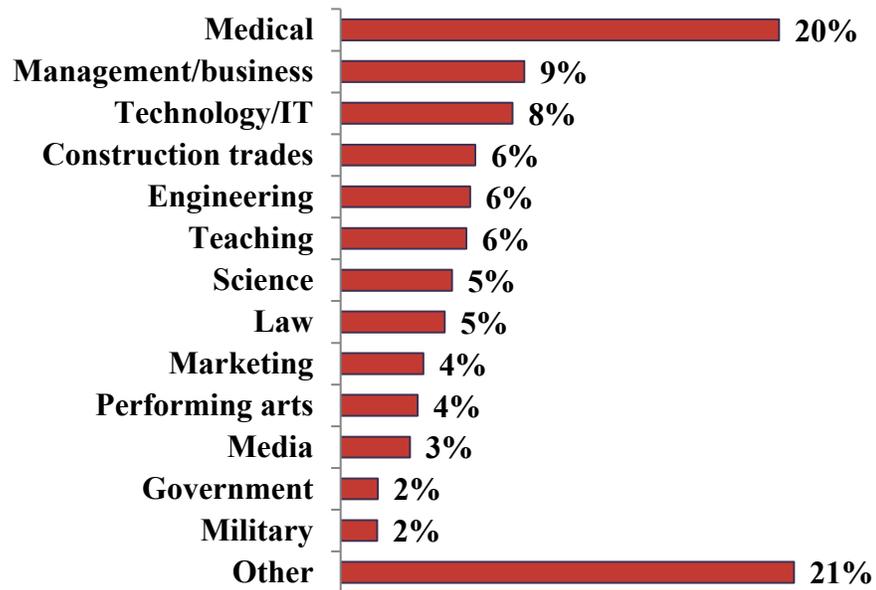
	2016	2026
Yes	74%	65%
No	12	16
Not sure	14	19

If Have Career Plans, What Are They?

A follow-up question to the 65% with a clear sense of career direction inquired about which specific field they have in mind. Of 13 options listed, the medical field is by far the most attractive to this group of young adults, with 20% declaring it their field of choice. In distant second and third place, 9% want a career in management/business and 8% in technology/IT. The fourth place is shared by the construction trades, engineering, and teaching, each the preferred career choice of 6% of young adults with a chosen career path (Exhibit 5).

Behind these fields, smaller shares want careers in science (5%), law (5%), marketing (4%), the performing arts (4%), media (3%), government (2%), or the military (2%). Twenty-one percent of young adults who are certain of their career plans have other fields in mind, such as accounting, cosmetology, and social work.

**Exhibit 5. Field Chosen for a Career
(Percent of Respondents Who Know Desired Field)**

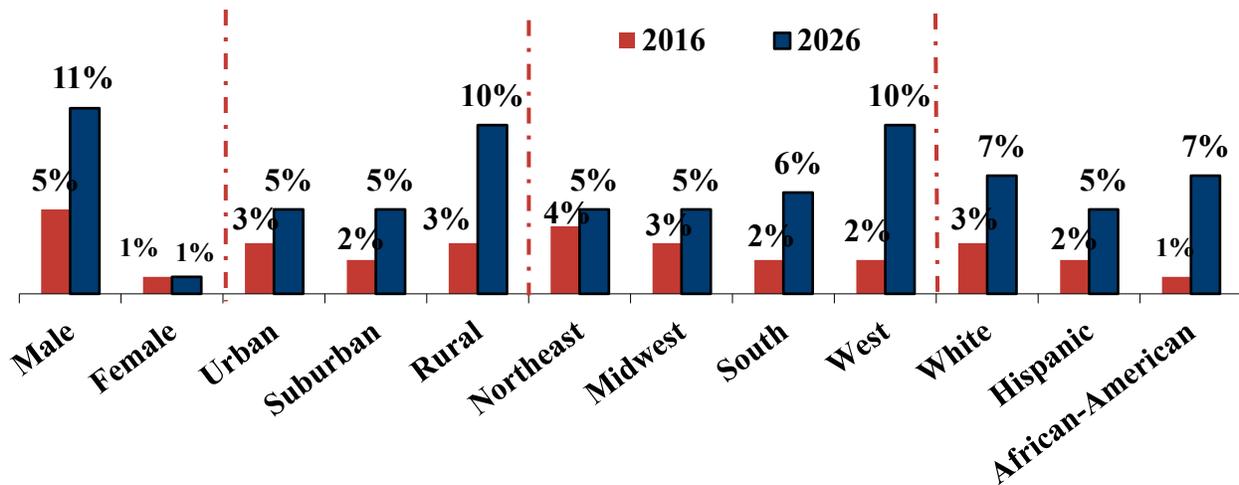


Beyond the headline that 6% of young adults with a clear career choice plan to work in the construction trades, it is important to disaggregate how various demographic groups feel toward a career in the trades. Gender lines, not surprisingly, show a significant dichotomy: whereas only 1% of women are interested in the trades, the share is 11 times higher among men (11%). The latter is more than twice as large than in 2016, when only 5% of young men had construction trades on their career card (Exhibit 6).

Community type also shows an important divide: young adults in rural settings are twice as likely to want a career in the construction trades (10%) as those in urban or suburban communities (5% each). In contrast, only 3% of young people living in rural communities were interested in the trades in 2016.

Looking at geography more broadly, using the four U.S. Census regions, shows that young adults in the West (10%) are more likely to want a career in the trades than those in the Northeast (5%), Midwest (5%), or South (6%). All four shares were under 5% in 2016. Interestingly, results are more consistent across racial/ethnic lines, as 5% to 7% of White, Hispanic, and African-American young adults want a career in the construction trades. For all three groups, the shares are higher than in 2016.

Exhibit 6. Young Adults Who Want a Career in Construction Trades
(Percent of Respondents Who Know Desired Field)



At the national level, the share of young adults with a clear sense of career direction who want to work in the construction trades doubled from 3% to 6% in the last decade (Exhibit 7). Of the 13 fields analyzed in this study, only the medical field experienced a larger increase, with its share of interested young adults rising by four percentage points to 20%. The fact that one out of every five young adults with a career plan wants to work in the medical field is not surprising, given that the healthcare industry accounts for the largest share—14%—of salaried jobs in the U.S. economy and has grown by more than [20% in the last decade](#).

Exhibit 7. Field Chosen for a Career - History

(Percent of Respondents Who Know Desired Field)

	2016	2026	Change (in pp)
Medical	16%	20%	+4
Management/business	12	9	-3
Technology/IT	9	8	-1
Construction trades	3	6	+3
Engineering	7	6	-1
Teaching	6	6	0
Science	6	5	-1
Law	4	5	+1
Marketing	4	4	0
Performing arts	3	4	+1
Media	4	3	-1
Government	3	2	-1
Military	2	2	0
Other	20	21	+1

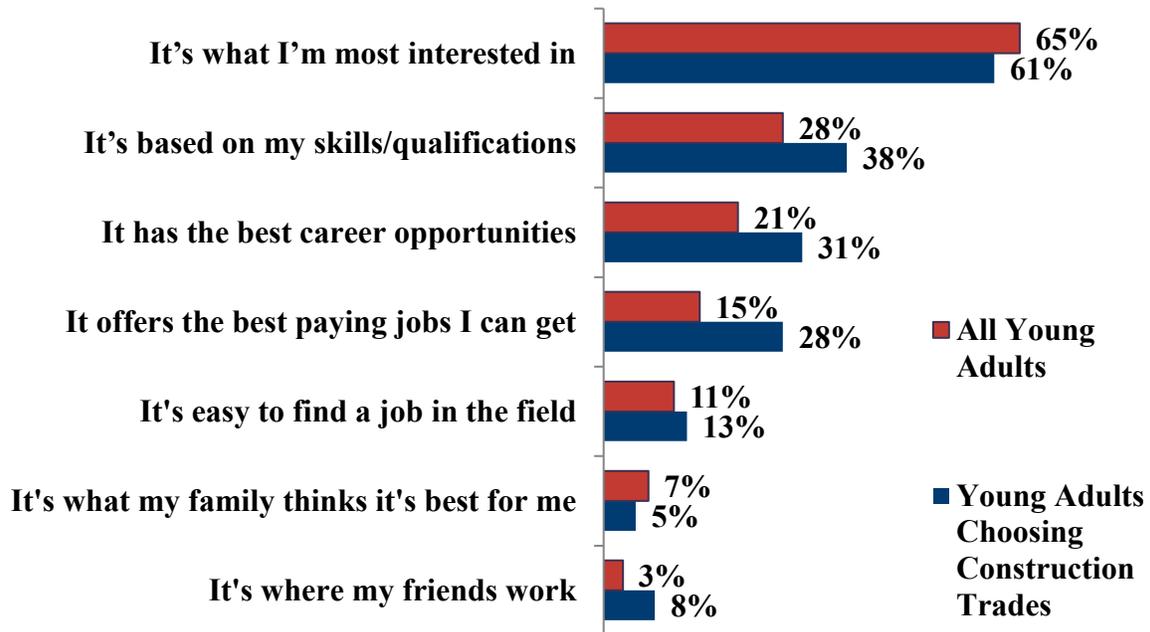
Reasons for Choosing a Field

There are many possible reasons why people select a particular career path, but this study listed seven reasonable, common-sense options and asked young adults to indicate which one(s) led them to their field of choice.

The single most important reason behind the choice of a career field is that it generates the most interest, both across all young adults (65%) and more specifically among those who want to work in the trades (61%) (Exhibit 8). The next three reasons are significantly more important for young adults who want a career in construction than for all young adults in general. For example, the ability to use their current skills/qualifications drives the career choice for 38% of young adults interested in the trades, compared to only 28% among young adults across all fields. Similarly, 31% of those interested in the trades choose it because the field offers the best career opportunities, compared to 21% among their peers across all fields. Finally, 28% of young adults who choose a career in the trades do so because it offers the best paying jobs accessible to them; in contrast, only 15% of young adults in general choose a

field due to high salary expectations. For most young adults, family and friends have little influence on their choice for a career field.

Exhibit 8. Reasons for Choosing Career Field
(Percent of Respondents Who Know Desired Field)

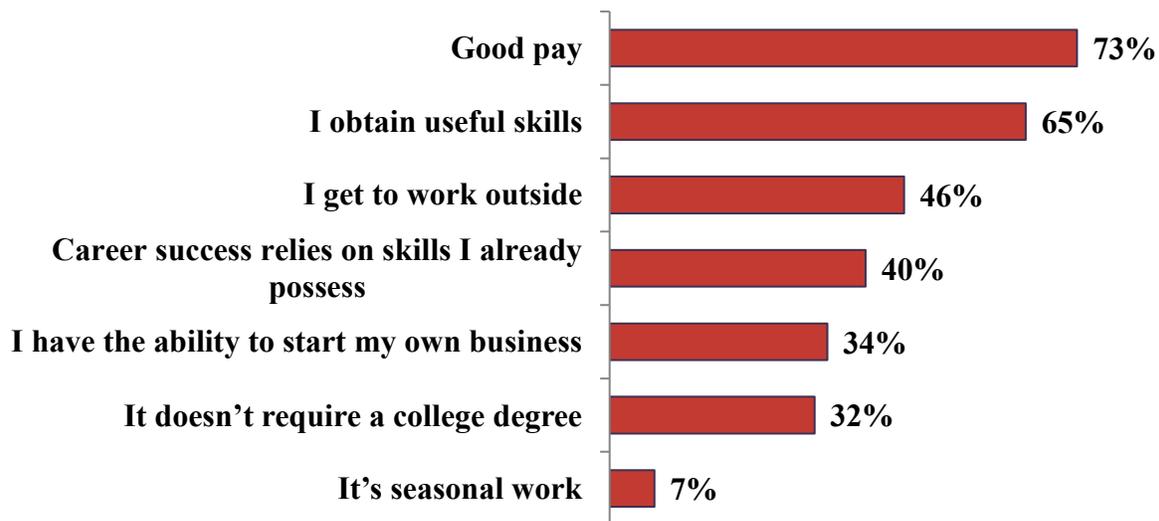


Benefits of a Career in the Construction Trades

A relevant question for those who want to work in the construction trades is the benefits they see in this career choice. Good pay (73%) and the ability to obtain useful skills (65%) are by far the two most important benefits for this group of young adults. Meaningful shares mention being able to work outside (46%) and the ability to use skills they already possess to drive career success (40%). Around one-third of young adults who aim for a career in the construction trades (or are already there) also cite as benefits the ability to start their own business (34%) and the field not requiring a college degree (32%) (Exhibit 9).

Exhibit 9. Most Important Benefits of a Career in the Construction Trades

(Percent of Respondents Who Want to Work in Construction Trades)



If Have No Career Plans, Any Chance Young Adults Would Consider the Trades?

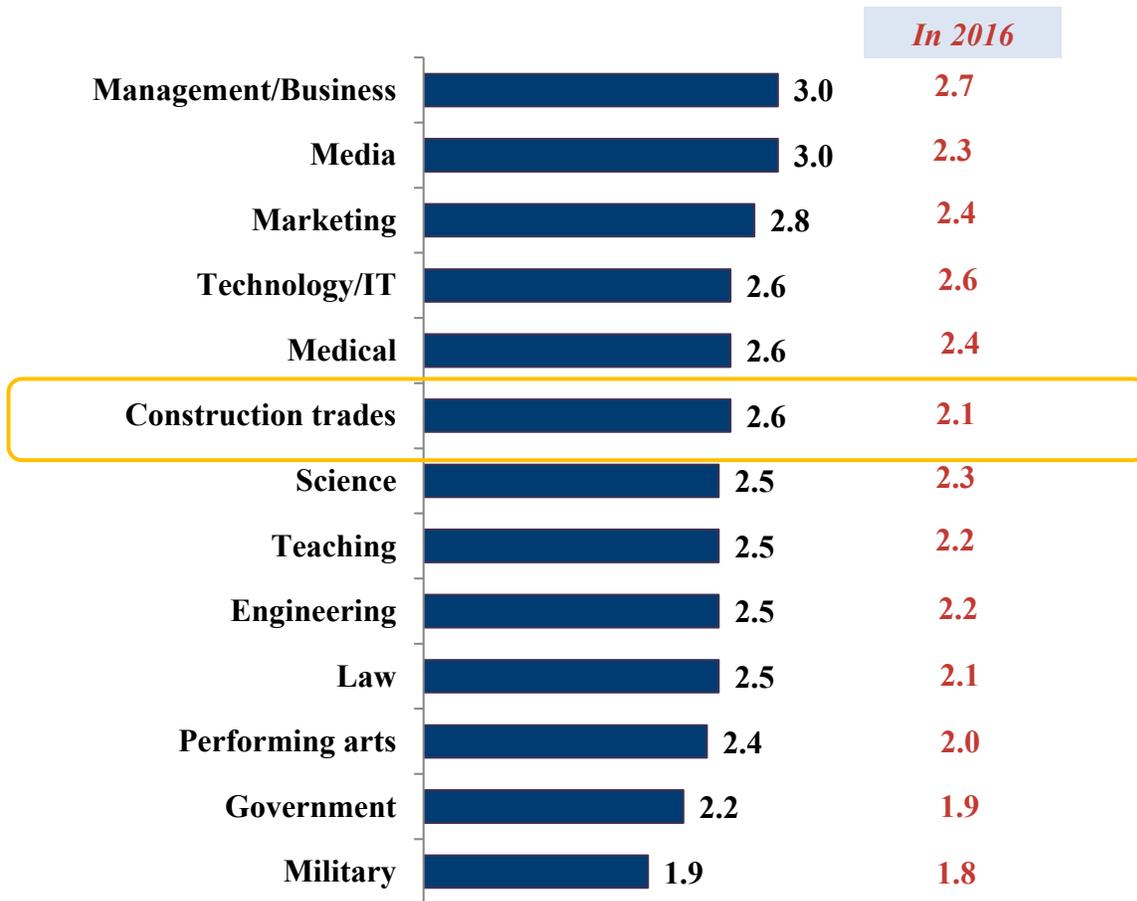
The 35% of young adults who are undecided about career plans received a follow-up question rating the likelihood of possible careers hedged on pay. More specifically, they were asked to rate the chance they might consider several fields using a scale from 1 to 5, where 1= *'not a chance I will consider the field no matter the pay'* and 5= *'very good chance I will consider the field if pay is high.'*

As it turns out, the three fields undecided young adults are most likely to consider—if the pay is high—are management/business (3.0 average rating), media (3.0), and marketing (2.8). But just behind those top magnets, construction trades (2.6) tie with technology/IT and medical as the fourth most likely fields undecided young adults would consider if the pay was sufficiently high (Exhibit 10). This finding stands in stark contrast to 2016, when the trades received an average rating of 2.1 and [ranked ninth on this same list](#).

Overall, 51% of undecided young adults are reluctant to consider a career in the trades regardless of pay. However, that share is down from 63% in 2016. On the contrary, 30% of undecided young adults would give the trades a second thought if compensation was high enough. That share is up from 18% a decade ago. Altogether, these shifts suggest that the attitudes of *some* young people towards the construction trades are changing, becoming more positive, and impacting their career choices.

Exhibit 10. What Is the Chance You May Consider a Career in these Fields?

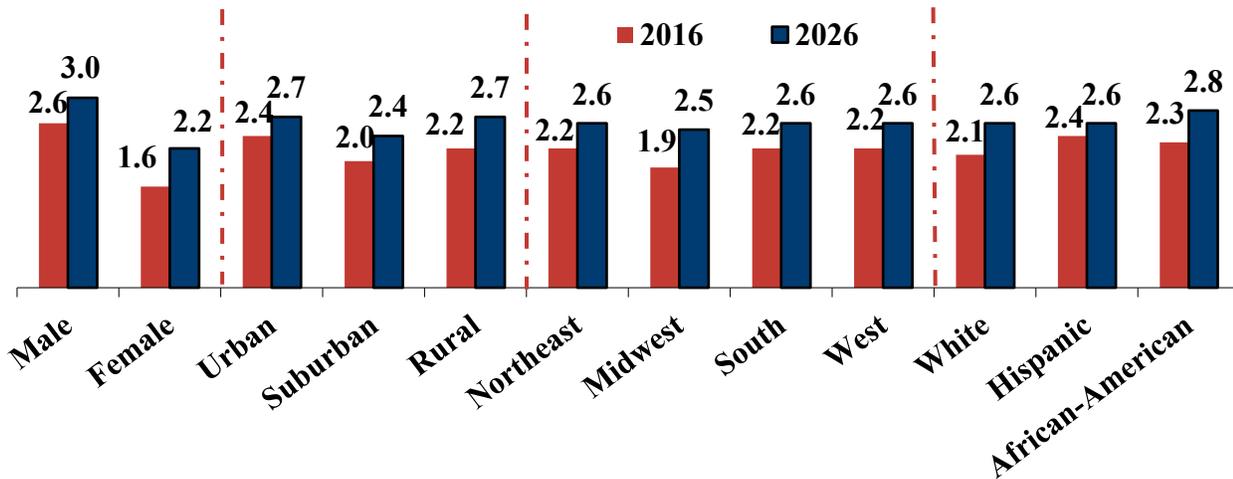
(Average rating; 1=not a chance no matter the pay, 5=very good chance if pay is high)



Compared to a decade ago, every demographic group is slightly more likely to be willing to consider a career in the construction trades if the pay is high enough. The most prominent examples are undecided young women and those in the Midwest. In 2016, women gave the chance of high pay luring them to the trades an average rating of 1.6 (remember, 1=not a chance no matter the pay, 5=very good chance if pay is high); in 2026, they gave it a 2.2. Among undecided young people in the Midwest, those ratings rose from 1.9 to 2.5 during this period. Other groups with at least a 0.5-point increase in willingness to consider a job in the trades for the right pay include White, African-American, and rural young adults (Exhibit 11).

Exhibit 11. Chance Undecided Young Adults Will Consider Career in Construction Trades

(Average Rating; 1= not a chance no matter the pay, 5=very good chance)



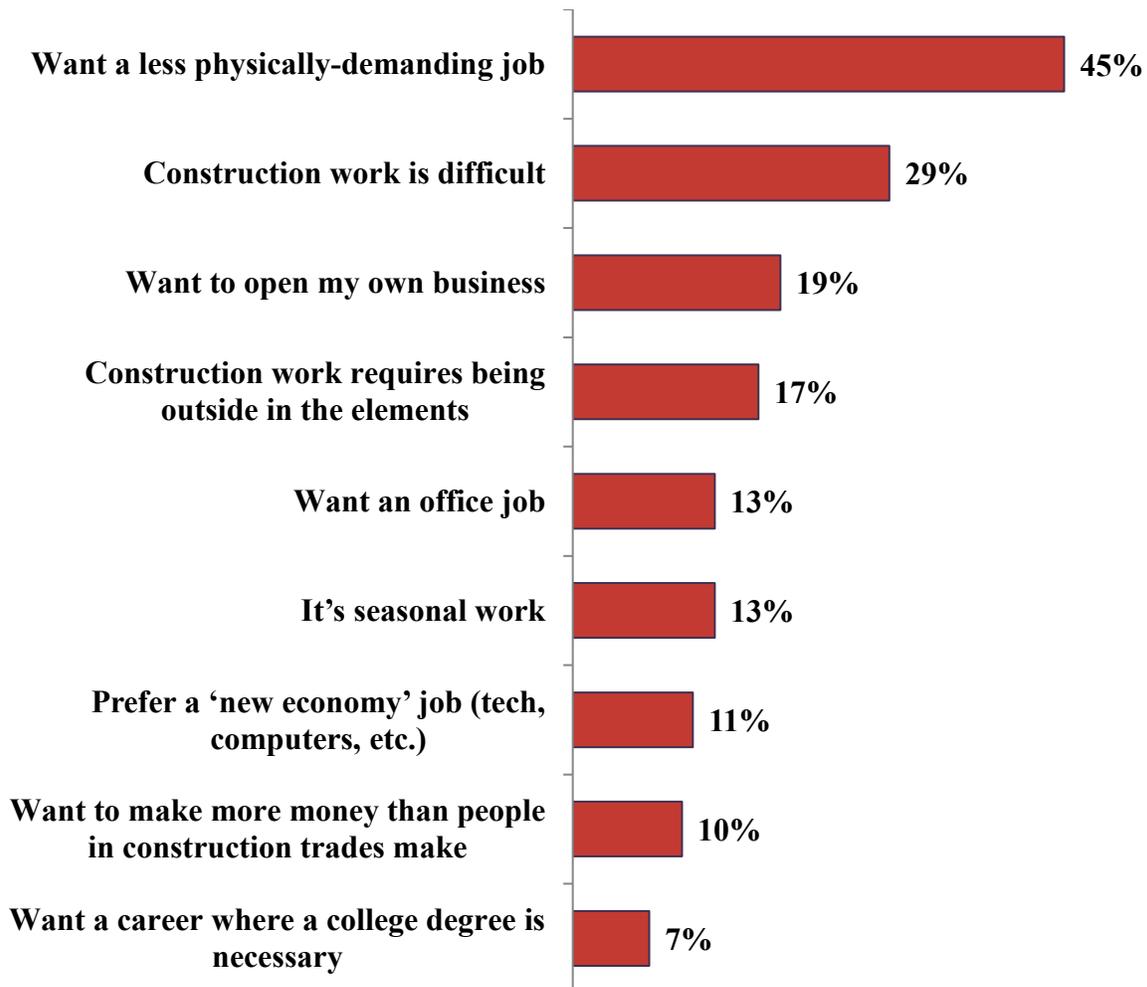
Why Not the Construction Trades

The 51% of undecided young adults who indicated there was no or little chance they would consider a career in the construction trades no matter the pay were prodded about the reasons for their resoluteness. The single most important reason is wanting a less physically demanding job, cited by 45%. Not unrelated, 29% say it is because construction work is difficult (Exhibit 12).

The remaining reasons are far less important deterrents: 19% reject the idea of joining the trades because they want to open their own business, 17% because it requires being outside in the elements, 13% want an office job, 13% don't appreciate it's seasonal work, 11% prefer a 'new economy' job, 10% want to make more money, and a mere 7% stay away from the trades simply because they want a 'career where college is necessary.'

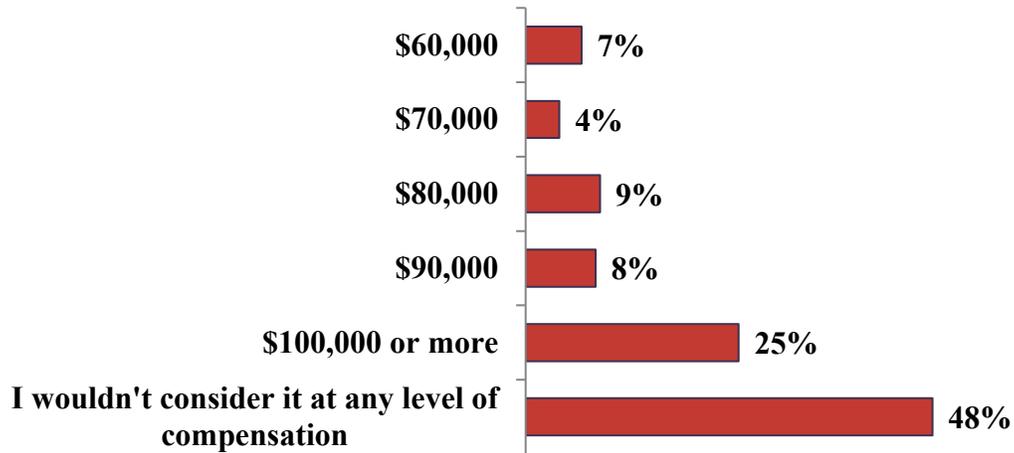
Looking at the reasons why different demographic groups of undecided young adults rule out the possibility of a job in the trades no matter the level of compensation shows they are consistent across the board, namely they all desire a less physically demanding job and consider this type of work to be difficult.

Exhibit 12. Reasons You Wouldn't Consider a Career in the Construction Trades
(Percent of Respondents Reporting No or Little Chance They'd Consider
a Career in the Construction Trades)



The 51% of undecided young adults who see no or very little chance of joining the construction trades regardless of pay also answered this question: what level of annual compensation, if any, would increase the chance that you might reconsider? Just under half (48%) confirmed they would not accept a career in the trades at any level of compensation. But the majority (52%) would be willing to give the construction trades a second thought for the right paycheck. That figure is at least \$90,000 for 32% of this group, and \$60,000 to \$80,000 for the other 20% (Exhibit 13).

Exhibit 13. Compensation Level Necessary to Increase Chance You Would Consider a Career in the Construction Trades
(Percent of Respondents Reporting No or Little Chance They'd Consider a Career in the Construction Trades)

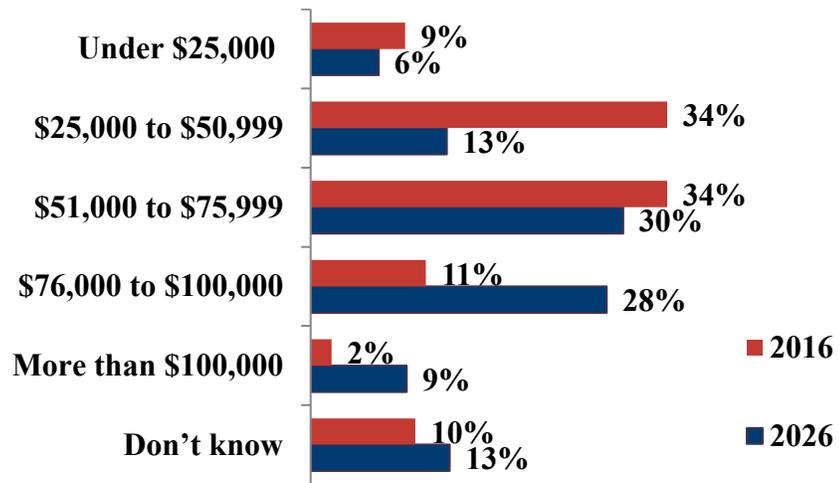


Strong Improvement in Earning Perceptions for Trade Jobs

To more concretely understand their perceptions of the financial benefits of a career in the construction trades, every young adult in the study was asked how much they thought people in the trades earn annually. Results reveal a dramatic improvement in young people's assessments of earnings in this industry during the last 10 years. In 2016, young adults estimated the median annual salary of a person working in the trades at \$56,150; by 2026, their estimate had risen to \$76,900—a 37% increase (Exhibit 14).

Looking more closely at how earning perceptions for the trades have shifted, the largest change took place among those who think the typical industry salary is in the \$25,000 to \$50,999 range. That share dropped by 21 points, from 34% in 2016 to 13% in 2026. In stark contrast, the share of young adults assessing the typical salary in the trades is between \$76,000 and \$100,000 rose by 17 points during the same period, from 11% to 28%. Perhaps more indicative of why the share of young adults wanting a career in trades doubled from 3% to 6% in the last decade is the fact that now 9% think it will pay them over \$100,000, compared to a negligible 2% in 2016.

**Exhibit 14. How Much Do You Think People in the Construction Trades Earn Annually?
(Percent of Respondents)**



	2016	2026	% Chg.
Median	\$56,150	\$76,900	+37%

How Much Do Construction Occupations Actually Pay?

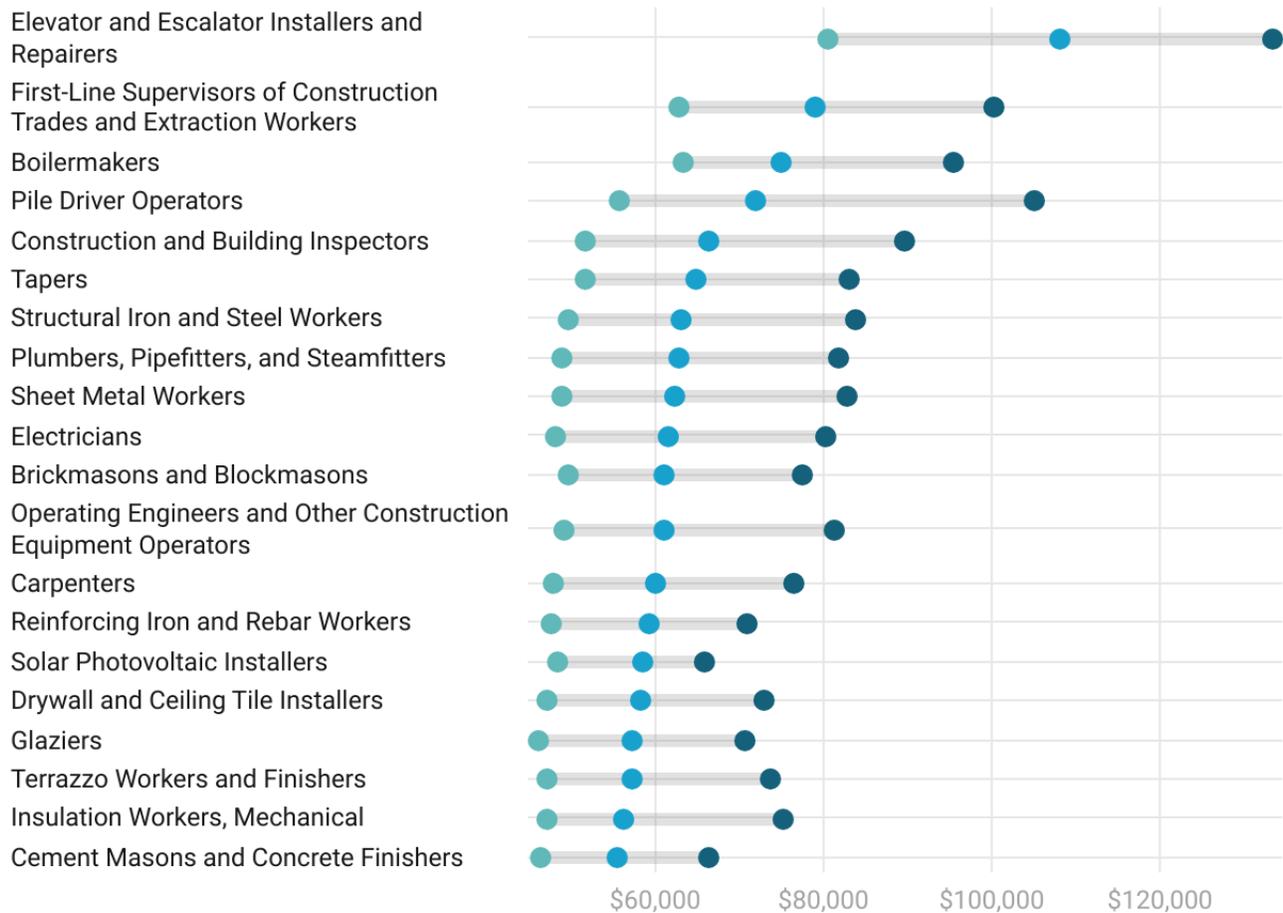
This study reveals that about half (52%) of undecided young adults with a predisposition to reject a career in the construction trades would be willing to reconsider the field if the pay was sufficiently high. Given that large potential pool of workers, the next most relevant data point is actual construction wages. In other words, is there some overlap between the salary levels that would lead these young adults to reconsider the trades and what the market can actually offer them? To answer this question, NAHB analyzed the latest information available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics [Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics](#) (OEWS) and summarized it in Exhibit 15, which shows median wages for the 20 highest paid construction occupations as well as the wages for the top and bottom quartile of each occupation. To put the construction trades in perspective of national trends, the median annual wage in the U.S. is \$49,500, while the top quartile of workers (the highest paid 25%) earns at least \$78,810¹.

¹ The OEWS wages are straight-time, gross pay. They do not include premium pay (stock and year-end bonuses, over-time pay, weekend premium pay, etc.)

Exhibit 15. Wages in Construction Occupations, 2024

Highest Paid Construction Occupations in Construction

● 75% MAKE AT LEAST ● MEDIAN ● TOP 25% MAKE AT LEAST



Source: 2024 OEWS, BLS • Created with Datawrapper

The highest paid occupation among the construction trades is elevator installers and repairers with median wages of \$108,130 per year, where the top 25% make at least \$133,370. First-line supervisors of construction trades are next on the list, with median annual wages of \$78,900 and the top quartile earns at least \$100,150.

Plumbers and electricians, who typically require specialized training and licensing, also have median wages above the national median. The typical plumber working in construction earns \$62,820 and those in the highest paid 25% bring in at least \$81,740. For electricians, those figures are \$61,420 and \$80,170, respectively. Carpenters, who usually face fewer formal education requirements than

plumbers and electricians, earn median annual wages of \$59,890 and the top quartile have wages that exceed \$76,290.

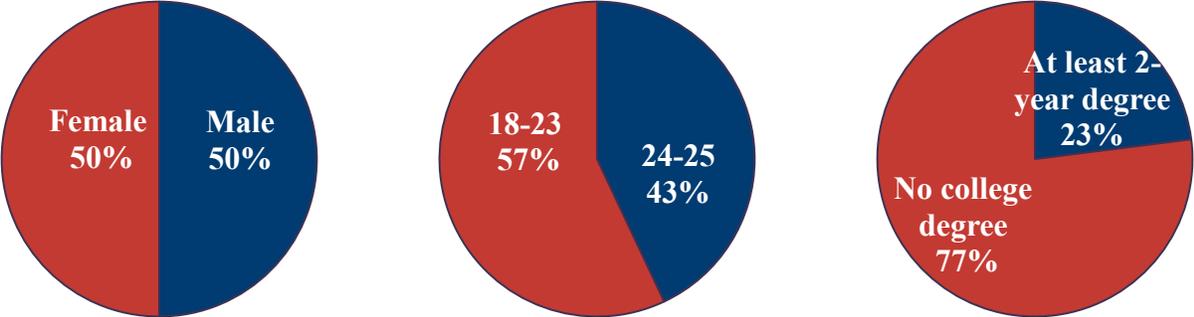
But wages higher than the national norm are not exclusive to just plumbers, electricians, or carpenters. In fact, the typical worker in each of the 20 construction occupations on Exhibit 15 earns more money than the typical U.S. worker in general. And except for solar installers and cement masons/finishers, the top quartile of workers in each of the 20 occupations commands a salary of at least \$70,000.

Comparing the salary expectations of young adults who would give the trades a second thought for the right pay and the wages currently paid by these occupations suggests that overlap does indeed exist. Many trades already offer wages high enough to attract some of these reticent young adults. To be more precise, recall that \$60,000 to \$80,000 in annual wages would be sufficient for 20% of undecided young adults predisposed against a career in the trades to reconsider that position. There are 12 occupations on Exhibit 15 whose median annual wages meet or exceed that threshold: from elevator installer down to operating engineers/equipment operators.

Respondent’s Profile

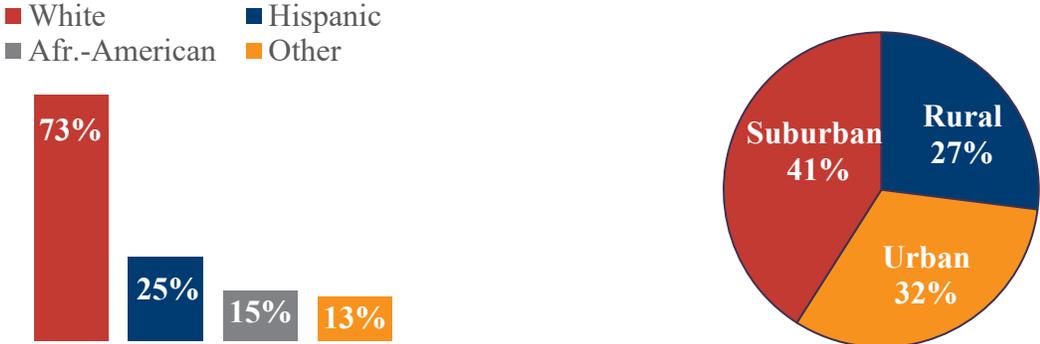
The young adults who participated in this study are evenly divided across gender lines: 50% female, 50% male. In terms of age, 57% range between 18 and 23 years old and 43% between 24 and 25. A majority of 77% lack any type of college degree, while the remaining 23% hold at least an Associates’ 2-year degree (Exhibit 16).

**Exhibit 16. Gender, Age, & Educational Attainment
(Percent of Respondents)**



Two other important demographic characteristics worth highlighting are the racial/ethnic composition as well as the community type where respondents live (Exhibit 17). Seventy-three percent are White, 25% Hispanic, and 15% African-American. The remaining 13% are Asian, American Indian, or other race, keeping in mind respondents could choose multiple categories. Looking at community type, a plurality of 41% lived in the suburbs, 32% in an urban setting, and 27% in a rural community.

**Exhibit 17. Race/Ethnicity & Community Type
(Percent of Respondents)**



Conclusion

Most young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 have a clear sense of career direction. Although only 6% want a career in the construction trades, the share has doubled since 2016 (3%). This group admits the most important benefit of a career in the trades is good pay (73%).

Among the undecided without a clear path forward, strong reluctance to consider the construction trades as a possible career has declined considerably in the last decade, from 63% in 2016 to 51% in 2026. Meanwhile, 30% of this undecided group is now willing to give the trades a second thought if the pay is sufficiently high, a significant improvement over the 18% who did in 2016.

The most important finding for the home building industry is that most undecided young adults between 18 and 25 years old who in theory would not choose a career in the trades would reconsider it for an annual salary of at least \$60,000. There are 12 construction occupations whose median annual wages already meet or exceed that threshold.