Research Article

Gen Z High School Workers: An AI-Driven Mixed-Methods Study of Labor-Law Literacy and Career Impact

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ABSTRACT

Gen Z high school students in Massachusetts work part-time in retail, food service, and other entry-level roles, yet often lack awareness of their legal rights. These early employment experiences shape career trajectories both positively and negatively. This study employs an Artificial Intelligence (AI) driven mixed-methods design combining a quantitative online survey of eighty-nine students with ethnographic field observations of more than twenty teen workers. The survey measured knowledge of labor protections, attitudes toward workplace compliance, and career readiness. The ethnographic component provided contextual insights through firsthand observation and engagement. To enhance analytical rigor and efficiency, Microsoft Azure AutoML was utilized to classify survey responses, while GPT-4 was employed for thematic coding of open-ended data, enabling reduced manual effort and improved accuracy in identifying sentiment and themes. Findings reveal a significant gap in legal awareness that may hinder both student well-being and career progression. The data shows that 42 percent of teens have never received any training on workplace rights, 53 percent want instruction on labor law and youth protections, while two-thirds believe high schools should be required to provide it. This knowledge gap poses a risk to both student well-being and future career growth. Hence, the study recommends that schools incorporate a brief labor rights unit into required courses and collaborate with employers and unions to offer free or low-cost membership in youth worker councils, enabling Gen Z students to enter the workforce informed, safe, and prepared.

Keywords: Gen Z Teen Employment; Labor-law Literacy; Work-life Balance; Mixed-methods study; Artificial Intelligence

INTRODUCTION

Part-time employment during high school attracts persistent debate in the United States (22). Advocates highlight concrete benefits, including disposable income, early budgeting practices, and the development of transferable job skills (9, 17). These gains matter even more for adolescents who help support their families or save for secondary and post-secondary education (16). Critics counter that heavy schedules undermine academic achievement; a recent longitudinal analysis found that each additional ten weekly work hours raises the probability of dropping out by roughly ten percentage points (10). The policy landscape already contains safeguards meant to

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balance these outcomes. Federal and state statutes limit evening hours, mandate uninterrupted meal breaks, and bar minors from hazardous tasks. Yet protections function only when young workers recognize and invoke them.

Evidence suggests that recognition is rare. National surveys repeatedly show that most teenagers cannot name a single rule governing breaks, nightly curfews, or machinery restrictions (13, 19). School systems, despite their civic-education mandate, seldom address workplace law within required courses (7). A growing share of Gen Z high school students, therefore, enter the labor market with minimal knowledge of the legal limits on weekly hours or the right to a paid rest period. This ignorance can erode work-life balance and academic persistence (4). Gen Z students who are aware of the statutory hour limits are better positioned to refuse excessive shifts during exam weeks, insist on legally required breaks that reduce fatigue, and avoid tasks that may lead to injury. Over time, informed workers are also more likely to select employers that respect youth labor standards, maintain consistent school attendance, and build positive job references that support long-term career growth. These observations lead to the study's guiding inquiry:

> *To what extent do Gen Z high school workers understand their legal labor protections? How does this literacy (or lack thereof) influence their work-life balance and future career trajectories? Which school-based interventions would most effectively close any knowledge gaps?*

The present study addresses these research questions through an Artificial Intelligence (AI) driven mixed-methods design. An online questionnaire gathered responses from eighty-nine employed student samples in grades nine through twelve across low to high-income towns in Massachusetts, U.S.A., generating quantitative estimates of labor-law literacy. To enrich these data, the researcher recorded ethnographic field notes while working at a store in Wilmington, Massachusetts. That workplace provided a revealing case. School night shifts routinely ended at ten o'clock, the legal cutoff for sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds, yet few employees recognized the rule before it was discussed during data collection. Informal conversations uncovered similar blind spots regarding thirty-minute meal breaks and equipment restrictions. By pairing numerical findings with on-site observations, the study measures the extent of adolescent ignorance, explores the everyday behaviors that stem from it, and proposes both curricular and policy reforms that could protect Gen Z high school students from avoidable academic and workplace harm.

To enhance analytical rigor and efficiency, we integrated Microsoft Azure AutoML for classifying survey responses, which significantly reduced manual preprocessing time and improved labeling accuracy, particularly for nuanced sentiment categories (20). Additionally, GPT-4 was used for thematic coding of open-ended responses. Compared to traditional interrater coding, GPT-4 demonstrated high internal consistency across multiple runs and alignment with human-coded benchmarks, as measured by the Cohen κ coefficient (15), offering both speed and thematic depth without compromising interpretability (26). These tools enabled fast iteration and the extraction of scalable insights from our diverse survey data, including open-ended responses.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature, followed by a description of the five-stage methodological framework. The subsequent sections detail the data collection procedures and present the exploratory analysis and discussion of the findings. Policy and curricular recommendations are then provided, followed by an examination of the study's limitations and prospects for future research. The paper concludes with a summary of the key contributions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Labor-law Literacy

American Student Assistance (2) indicates a growing demand for school-based career literacy. Furthermore, it claims that schools are the logical venue for skill and rights education. Researchers continue to ask two simple questions: How much do teens know about labor laws, and do after-school jobs help or hurt them? Hirao (10) administered a six-question quiz to college students in Japan; on average, they answered only half of the questions correctly. The few who did better had taken classes about work, studied law or economics or had already dealt with a bad part-time job. Hirao (10) ultimately suggests that schools should teach these rules to children before they start working. Arano *et al*. (3) demonstrate that working longer hours during the study has a negative effect on their academic performance. Kroupova, Havranek (13) conducted a meta-analysis by reviewing 69 previous studies on student jobs. They found grades drop only a tiny bit when hours rise, but the chance of dropping out jumps about ten percent for every ten extra work hours each week. The takeaway from that study is that small

shifts are okay, but long shifts are risky, so hour limits matter more than banning teen work.

Rauscher, Runyan (19) conducted research with American teens and their parents to assess their knowledge of child labor laws. Even though most had "heard" of the laws, the average score was just 1.8 out of six, and hardly any teen-parent pairs knew the legal quitting time. They say stronger work permit checks could double as quick lessons. Heise (9) reviewed national job trends and warned that current data are messy; we still can't give a clear yes-or-no answer on whether teen jobs are good or bad. Moskowitz (17) reviewed U.S. history and demonstrated that the primary child labor law from 1938 leaves significant gaps and that the government rarely intervenes. Their study reveals that today's weak protections will remain weak until those gaps are closed and the rules are actually enforced. Together, these studies show that most teens are unaware of their rights, that light work can teach valuable skills, and heavy work can negatively impact their school attendance. Both schools and lawmakers need to take action.

Work-Life Balance and Career Growth

Staff *et al*. (23) found in their study that working more than 20 hours per week was associated with missed homework, fewer extracurricular activities, and increased risky behavior. Deloitte Global Survey (5) study shows that Gen Z actively values work-life balance over hierarchy. American Student Assistance (2) study reveals that Gen Z students have high anxiety over unclear career paths without guidance. Thomas (25) concludes in their research that high-intensity, high-satisfaction work raises dropout odds by 8 to 12 percentage points on average.

Research Gap and Study Rationale

Existing studies agree that teens are largely unaware of labor laws; however, they disagree on exactly how this ignorance translates into academic risk, as most rely on small quizzes or secondary datasets rather than fresh, U.S.-based field evidence. Scholars call for schools to deliver rights instruction and for policymakers to tighten enforcement. Still, no research has measured whether students themselves want such instruction or how it might improve their work-life balance and career plans. By combining a statewide survey of Gen-Z high school workers with on-site observations, this study provides the first mixed-methods evidence on how legal literacy gaps interact with work hours, school engagement, and early career choices, information essential for designing targeted curricular and policy interventions that the literature demands.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Methodological Framework

Figure 1 presents the proposed five-stage methodological framework that guided the study. The first stage involved the collection of mixed-methods data, combining a structured online survey with in-person ethnographic observations. The second stage focused on data preparation; Azure Machine Learning AutoML (18, 20) carried out automated type harmonization, imputation, and encoding.

Generative AI models provided duplicate checks and code-label verification to strengthen reliability (12). During the third stage, exploratory analysis was conducted. AutoML generated descriptive statistics and preliminary predictive models (21) for quantitative variables. In the exploratory phase, AutoML was used exclusively for data profiling (8). The platform automatically generated descriptive statistics for each numeric variable, including counts, means, medians, standard deviations, minima, maxima, and missing-value rates, while flagging potential outliers (8). These outputs afforded a rapid, code-free appraisal of variable distributions and data quality. In contrast, large-language models extracted recurring themes from the field notes, allowing the numeric and textual strands to converge (24). The fourth stage organized these insights into tables, visualization and narrative using Python Jupyter Notebook (6) that directly addressed the research question. The fifth and final stage converted the evidence into actionable guidance, formulating policy and curriculum recommendations designed to enhance labor rights literacy among high school workers.

Figure 1. Five-Stage Methodological Framework.

Data Collection

A survey questionnaire, as shown in Table 1, was framed using "Google Forms" based on the literature review and research question. The Google Form survey was initially distributed via various channels, e.g., Email, Snapchat, WhatsApp, etc., to high school students in several Massachusetts towns who work after class or on weekends, and each recipient was encouraged to forward the link to other working classmates statewide, creating a snowball sample that spanned multiple regions. Responses were gathered through Google Forms over a two-month window, yielding the quantitative dataset for this study.

In parallel, the author, who had spent two years working in a retail store, conducted an ethnographic component, systematically jotting down field notes on the day-to-day conversations and behaviors of more than twenty teenage coworkers. Condensed summaries of those observations were logged in OneNote, as illustrated in Figure 2. After collection, all survey and field-note data underwent cleaning, profiling, wrangling, and validation in an Azure Machine Learning Jupyter notebook, where AutoML handled automated preprocessing and descriptive visualizations (20), while Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) model GPT-4 (1, 14) served as a generative aid for additional pattern discovery and thematic coding (15, 26).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Summary Statistics

Table 2 summarizes the composition of the 89 high school students in the study. Two-thirds identify as female and one-third as Male, with no respondents selecting a non-binary option. Nearly half are juniors, while seniors,

Table 1. Survey Questionnaire Template

#	Question Text	Response Options / Guidance
1	What grade are you currently in?	10th; 11th; 12th; 9th
2	What is your gender?	Female; Male
3	How many hours do you work per week (on average)?	1 to 5 hours; 11 to 15 hours; 16 to 20+ hours; 6 to 10 hours
4	What type of job do you currently have (or most recently held)?	List of known generic youth employment types with "Other" options
5	At what age did you start working during the school year?	14 to 15; 16 to 17; 18+; Under 14
6	When you got your job, were you asked to show any legal documents (e.g., working papers, age certificate, school approval)?	No; Yes
7	Did your school provide information or training about your rights as a working minor?	I'm not sure; No; Yes
8	Are you aware of any laws that limit the number of hours high school students can work on school nights?	I've heard of them but don't know the details; No; Yes
9	Have you ever worked more hours than you think is legally allowed on a school night or during school hours?	I'm not sure what the limits are; No; Yes
10	What impact, if any, has your job had on your academic performance or attendance?	Negative (e.g., missed work, fatigue); Neutral; Positive (e.g., better time management)
11	Are you compromising on any of your school activities (e.g., sports, clubs, music, tutoring) because of work?	No; Sometimes — depends on the week; Yes
12	Have you ever felt that your job is "enough for life," making you lose sight of your long-term goals, dreams, or college plans?	Maybe; No; Not sure; Yes
13	Has your job changed your life in a positive or negative way (e.g., confidence, communication, time or money skills)?	A mix of both; Mostly negative; Mostly positive
14	Has working helped you develop professional goals or legal career interests (e.g., workplace fairness, employment law, union advocacy)?	Maybe; No; Yes, definitely

Continued Table 1. Survey Questionnaire Template

#	Question Text	Response Options / Guidance
15	Have you ever been formally trained on your workplace rights (e.g., breaks, overtime pay, harassment, safety)?	I'm not sure what rights I have; No; Yes, during orientation.
16	Have you or your coworkers ever experienced unfair treatment based on your age?	Open-ended text
17	Do you think high school workers should have legal protections beyond what currently exists?	No — current laws are fair; Not sure; Yes — we need stronger protections
18	Have you ever heard of any of the following terms?	List of labor laws and acts, e.g., FLSA, OSHA
19	If you saw or experienced something illegal at work, who would you talk to?	A government labor agency (like DOL or OSHA); A teacher or school staff; I wouldn't know who to talk to; My manager; My parents
20	Do you know if employees at your workplace are part of a union?	I don't know what a union is; No; Yes
21	Would you support a union or worker council for high school workers like you if it gave you a voice in workplace policies?	Maybe, but I'd want to learn more; No, I prefer individual responsibility; Not sure; Yes, absolutely
22	What would you want a student worker union or support organization to do for you? E.g., help with schedule complaints, ensure fair pay, offer legal help, educate about rights, etc.	Open-ended text
23	Do you believe schools should be legally required to teach working students about their labor rights and protections?	Maybe; No; Yes
24	Would you be interested in learning more about labor law, youth work protections, or how to advocate for young workers?	Maybe — if it's quick and practical; No; Yes — at school; Yes — at work
25	Are you okay with your responses being used (anonymously) for a student research project about labor law and youth employment?	No; Yes

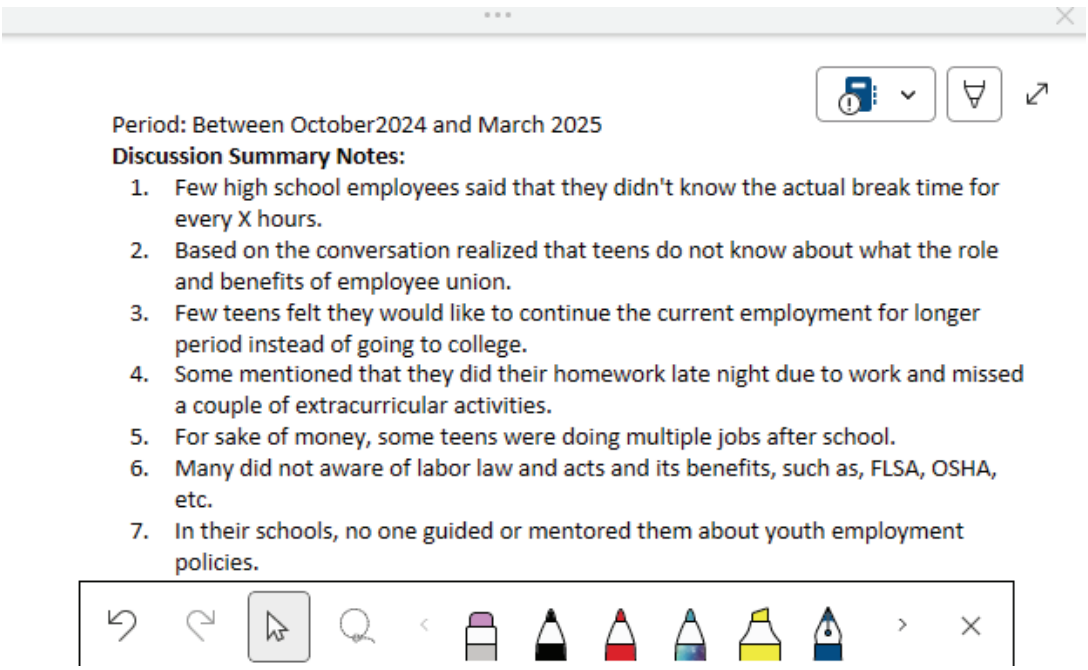

Figure 2. Ethnographic Field Study Sample Notes.

Table 2. Participant Profile of Gen Z High School Workers (N = 89)

Profile Metric	Sample Breakdown	Notes
Gender	67% Female; 33% Male	No non-binary individuals in this sample.
Grades	5% Freshman; 15% Sophomore; 49% Junior; 31% Senior;	Private and public high school students.
Working Hours per Week	20% -- 1 to 5 hours; 36% -- 6 to 10 hours; 30% -- 11 to 15 hours; 14% -- 16 to 20 hours;	Working more hours on weekends and Fridays.
Employment Domain	Retail/Food Service, Carpentry, Tutoring/Childcare, Office/ Clerical/Library Support, Lifeguard/Referee/Coach, and Receptionist.	20+ job types consolidated
Work-Start Age	8% -- Under 14; 58% -- 14 to 15; 32% -- 16 to 17; 2% -- 18+;	Late high schoolers

sophomores, and first-year students make up the rest, reflecting both public and private school enrollment. Most students work between six and fifteen hours per week, typically on weekends or Fridays, and they cluster in retail and food service jobs, though more than twenty distinct roles appear across six broad employment domains. A majority began paid work at ages fourteen or fifteen. Yet, a small share started earlier, and a few only after turning eighteen—evidence of varied entry points into the youth labor market.

Labor-Law Awareness

Figure 3 confirms that Gen Z high school workers recognize only the most intuitive protections while remaining largely unaware of the statutes that enforce those rights. Nearly nine in ten students say they have "heard of" the minimum-wage law and child-labor laws, terms that surface frequently in everyday news and classroom discussions.

Yet familiarity collapses when the labels become more technical: barely half can identify OSHA, the agency that investigates safety complaints, and only 18 percent recognize the Fair Labor Standards Act, the statute that sets the minimum wage, overtime rules, and hour limits they believe they know.

Awareness of the "right-to-work" concept is even lower, at 21 percent, underscoring earlier survey themes that students are unsure how union rules intersect with youth employment. The sharp drop-off between broad concepts and the legal mechanisms behind them illustrates the paper's central argument: High schoolers possess headline-level impressions of labor law but lack the deeper statutory literacy needed to enforce their rights. Embedding a short labor rights module in required courses would bridge this gap by connecting familiar ideas of wages and safety to the specific laws and agencies that protect them.

Work-Life Balance

Responses to questions 10 to 14 paint a nuanced picture of work-life balance among the surveyed Gen-Z students, as shown in Figure 4. More than half (53 percent) say their

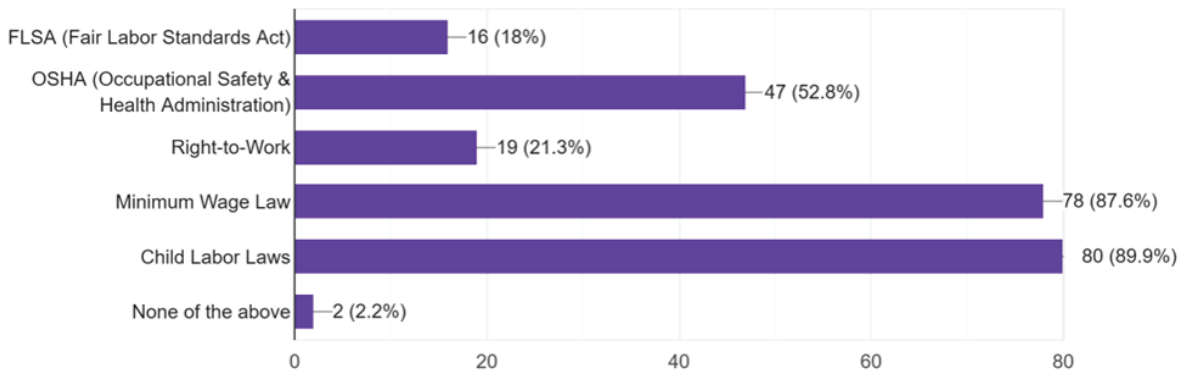

Figure 3. Labor-Law Literacy. Depicts the level of knowledge Gen Z high school workers have regarding labor laws.

job has had a "neutral" academic impact, yet one in four reports missed assignments or fatigue, indicating a non-trivial academic cost.

When asked about extracurricular sacrifices, two in five admit to giving up clubs or sports at least occasionally, and another 21 percent do so regularly; only 39 percent maintain that work never intrudes on school activities. Fears that a paycheck might become "good enough for life," pulling teens away from long-term goals, are limited to a small minority. Only 2 percent agree outright, but 19 percent remain unsure, suggesting latent complacency for a fifth of the sample.

Encouragingly, a majority view employment as beneficial for personal growth: 55 percent describe mostly positive effects on confidence, communication, or money skills, and 48 percent say work has already shaped concrete career or legal-rights interests.

Overall, the data indicate that moderate job hours can enhance soft skills and foster career exploration. Still, the prevalence of academic and extracurricular trade-offs confirms earlier research that heavy or poorly timed schedules compromise students' broader educational experience, a tension the study's recommended hour limits and rights-literacy curriculum aim to resolve.

Perceptions of Labor Union Benefits

Figure 5's word cloud, generated using the Python word cloud generator (11), illustrates the perceptions of Gen Z teens regarding the benefits that unions can offer. From the teens' open-ended comments, "union" surfaces as a supporting rather than a dominant idea. It appears alongside verbs like *help*, *ensure* and *provide*, suggesting they view union membership chiefly as a practical tool for enforcing fair pay, breaks, and scheduling rules. The larger words in the word cloud, including *rights, fair, pay and educate,* show that their priority is simply knowing and securing legal protection; union involvement is mentioned as one concrete mechanism to achieve that goal and to channel complaints when supervisors ignore those protections. In short, students do not oppose unions; they see them as potential allies, but only after basic rights education and employer accountability are in place.

Recommendations

The study reveals a substantial knowledge gap that endangers the safety and long-term career prospects of Gen Z students. To equip teens with the information, work-life balance and safeguards they need, the following actions are advised:

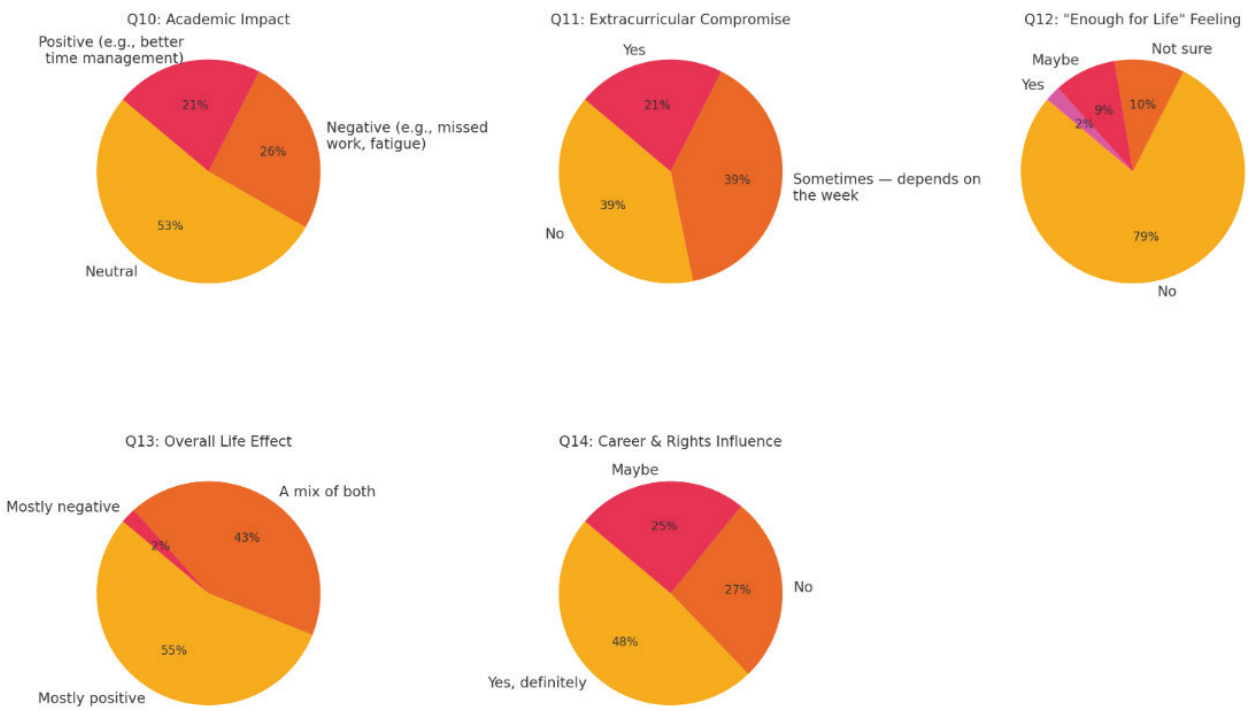

Figure 4. Work-Life Balance Snapshot. It provides insight into how Gen Z high school workers manage school, work, and personal time.

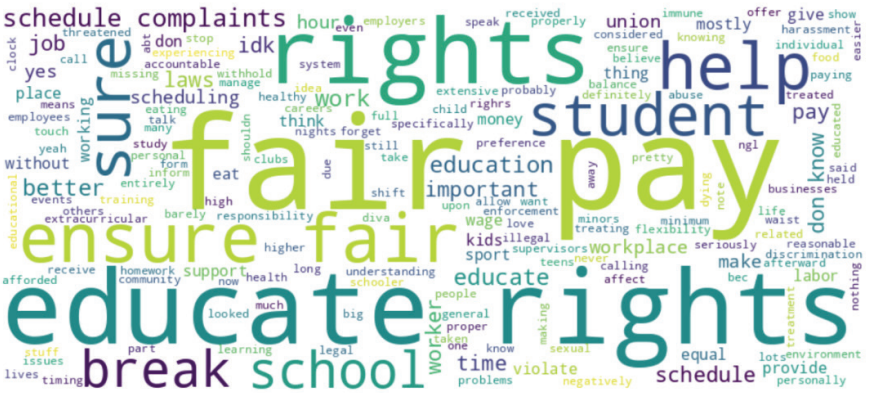

Figure 5. Perceptions of Labor Union Benefits among Gen Z High School Workers. This word cloud represents the most frequently mentioned terms in survey responses from Gen Z high school workers about labor unions. Larger words indicate a higher frequency of use.

1. ***Integrate labor-rights instruction***: Embed a brief, required module on youth employment laws in core high school courses.
2. ***Reinforce work-life balance***: Pair that instruction with enforceable hour limits to prevent academic and health trade-offs.
3. ***Build support networks***: Forge partnerships among schools, employers, and unions to offer free or low-cost membership in youth worker councils.

Limitations and Further Study

This study was geographically restricted to Massachusetts, U.S.A., and included a limited sample of high school students from randomly selected towns. The ethnographic component focused solely on youth employed in retail and food service settings, which may not reflect the broader spectrum of student work experiences. Future research should broaden the scope of youth employment domains and geographic coverage to include multiple U.S. states and extend to international contexts. A cross-national comparative approach would allow for an in-depth examination of international labor laws, youth employment policies, and workplace cultures. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how different legal frameworks and cultural norms shape young workers' rights, awareness, and career outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights a significant gap in labor law awareness among Gen Z high school students engaged in part-time work. A five-stage methodological framework is developed to examine labor law literacy, work-life balance, and early career influences among Gen Z high school workers in Massachusetts. By combining responses from eighty-nine survey participants with ethnographic observations recorded during retail shifts, the research provided both quantitative measures and contextual details on how teens understand and apply their workplace rights.

The AI-driven mixed-methods study revealed a substantial gap in legal awareness that affects student well-being and long-term career prospects. Most respondents were aware of broad protections, such as minimum wage laws, yet fewer could identify specific statutes or agencies that enforce these rights. Teens reported both benefits and costs associated with their employment, with many developing confidence, communication, and time management skills. In contrast, others experienced fatigue, missed assignments, or had to reduce their participation in extracurricular activities.

To address these findings, this study offers three key recommendations. First, implement a brief required unit on youth labor law within core high school coursework to ensure basic knowledge of rights. Second, reinforce work-life balance by pairing that instruction with clear hour limits that protect academic and health outcomes. Third, establish partnerships among schools, employers, and worker groups to offer free or low-cost access to youth worker councils, enabling students to enter the workforce informed, supported, and equipped to advocate for themselves.

Overall, these results demonstrate that well-designed

curricular and policy changes can empower Gen Z high school students to navigate part-time employment safely, responsibly, and with greater confidence in their future careers.

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AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

The data and code supporting this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS APPROVAL AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

This study did not involve the manipulation of human subjects or the collection of personal information. Additionally, no animal subjects or sensitive data requiring ethics approval were involved. For qualitative data collection, participants were explicitly informed that their responses would be anonymized and used solely for research purposes.

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