

KIDS COUNT Indicator Brief

Reducing the Number of Disconnected Youth

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701 St. Paul Street
Baltimore, MD 21202
www.aecf.org
www.kidscount.org

Produced for the Annie E. Casey Foundation by Rima Shore, Ph.D. & Barbara Shore, M.A.

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As they move toward adulthood, most young Americans are either in school, in the workforce, or in the military. Their lives are shaped by the challenges and routines of these anchoring institutions and by the social networks they encounter there. But far too many are disconnected from the roles and relationships that set young people on pathways toward productive adult lives. They lack the skills, supports, knowledge, or opportunities they need to succeed.

Some groups of young people are at especially high risk of faltering on the path to adulthood. In 2007, 8 percent of youth 16 to 19 were disconnected by virtue of being out of school and not working. American Indian (15 percent), African American (13 percent) and Hispanic (12 percent) youth were more likely to be disconnected than their white and Asian counterparts (KIDS COUNT Data Center, 2009). In addition male youth (8.4 percent) were more likely to be disconnected than female youth (7.9 percent) (Anne E. Casey Foundation, 2009).

Recent years have seen a shift in emphasis from providing educational and employment services to individual youth, to fostering prosocial communities where nurturing and developing the talents of the next generation are core commitments (Tyler, 2007). This approach seeks to engage all members of the community—government officials, educators, youth-serving organizations, social service agencies, mentors, and youth themselves—in helping young people connect to meaningful education and work.

This *KIDS COUNT Indicator Brief* outlines five strategies that can help to reduce the number of disconnected youth:

- **Re-engage disconnected youth and young adults in education**
- **Provide workforce development programs geared to the needs of disconnected youth and young adults**
- **Include disconnected youth in economic recovery investment and planning**
- **Address impediments to employment**
- **Create developmental opportunities that recognize the importance of social networks**
- **Aim for comprehensive reform, with a focus on cross-system collaboration**

- **Re-engage disconnected youth and young adults in education.**

Disconnected youth and young adults need multiple options for continuing their education, including accessible “on-ramps” leading to re-enrollment in high school. High school credentials are important, but will not put graduates on the path to productive adulthood unless the programs that lead to those credentials are geared to 21st century skills and open up better educational and employment options (Harris, 2005).

Increase investment in re-enrollment efforts. One promising strategy is to create comprehensive small schools, geared to returning teens that include summer, after-school, and employment programs. Programs for young adults (ages 20-24) are also needed. Promising models provide opportunities to learn work-related and technical skills, earn a high school diploma or its equivalent, and engage in productive, paid work several days per week (Fernandes et al., 2009). Effective alternative education and training programs use innovative pedagogies, have small classes, and connect learners to real-world challenges (Aron, 2006).

Structure accountability systems in ways that encourage school districts to re-enroll disconnected youth. As policymakers rethink No Child Left Behind legislation, they need to consider its impact on re-enrollment efforts. School districts will be more likely to invest resources in re-enrolling disconnected youth if Federal and state accountability systems recognize their efforts. They need assurances that students who re-enroll and drop out again will not be counted against the district (i.e. by overstating their dropout rate). In general, district leaders need to know that engaging disconnected youth, who are likely to score poorly on standardized tests at the time of re-enrollment, will not be held against them (Center for Labor Market Studies, 2007).

Increase understanding of the value and impact of the GED credential. Most dropouts are very persistent, close to 60 percent eventually receive a secondary credential—usually a General Education Diploma (GED) (Almeida et al., 2006). Currently, 15 to 20 percent of all new high school credentials issued each year are GEDs. However, the value of these credentials is not clear. Some researchers report that GED recipients perform better than dropouts in the U.S. labor market, but less well than graduates with high school diplomas (Arrighi & Maume, 2007). Others report that GED recipients fare no better than dropouts in the labor market. They warn that by lowering the dropout rate, the GED program “conceals major problems in American society” (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2008, p. 2).

Focus intensively on school safety. Many young people do not feel safe in school; re-enrollment programs must address this issue. A 2007 survey of high school students found that 16 percent of males and 8 percent of females had been in a physical fight on school property in the year preceding the survey. Five percent had not gone to school on one or more days in the month before the survey because they felt unsafe either at school or on their way to or from school (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). Ensuring youth feel safe is central to enhancing school enrollment and completion.

Create beneficial pathways to graduation for incarcerated youth. Many incarcerated youth take part in GED programs. Research suggests that, like other GED recipients, those who earn GEDs in prison fare no better than dropouts in the U.S. labor market (Tyler & Kling, 2007). In general, prison-based educational programs cannot offer

hoped-for benefits if graduates have intensive, unmet needs, such as a lack of work skills or drug dependency (Gaes, 2008).

- **Provide workforce development programs geared to the needs of disconnected youth and young adults.**

Efforts to reduce the number of disconnected youth have emphasized dropout prevention strategies. However, given data showing that nearly half of disconnected young people have a high school credential, policies and programs must include—but go beyond—efforts to increase the graduation rate (Rosch et al., 2008). They must include opportunities for young people to gain job skills and to participate in communities of practice.

Help students find part-time jobs. In terms of later earning power, at-risk students benefit more than other students from having part-time work. Schools can encourage work-based learning that can improve the motivation and ability of young people to achieve academic goals. School-linked part-time jobs provide better learning opportunities, reinforce academic skills, and improve work attitudes more than unsupervised work. Job quality matters whether workers are teens or adults. The kinds of jobs available to teens tend to require little skill or training and involve simple repetitive tasks. Such jobs have less benefit than those that are more engaging and offer more contact with and bonding to adults. Quantity matters as well as quality—and students need to be able to balance work and studies. When students work more than 15 hours per week during the school year, their academic achievement begins to suffer (DeSimone, 2006).

Strengthen school-to-career programs. For at-risk students to become invested in learning, the payoff to learning must become clearer and more realistic. School-to-career programs can serve this purpose. These programs can help students acquire the informal skills needed to succeed in the workplace, including the attitudes and work habits employers require. They teach the “soft skills” that employers value: good work habits (attendance, dependability, perseverance, attention to quality) and social skills (the ability to work with others and interact well with the public). While some employers provide training in academic or technical skills, few provide training in soft skills or work habits (Rosenbaum, 2002). Such opportunities can be especially important for young people in disinvested communities, who often lack the social networks and personal contacts that help entry-level workers learn about and land good jobs. School-to-career programs can give employers a chance to get to know and gain confidence in disadvantaged youth.

Help youth find pathways to careers, not just jobs. Temporary employment programs without support services bring little or no benefits to disadvantaged youth once they have left the program. Workforce development programs need to go beyond job placement, providing clear, long-term pathways toward careers. As young people interact with program staff, mentors, and co-workers as well as with natural helpers—neighbors, faith leaders, community members available as mentors—in their neighborhoods, they begin

to develop an identity as a member of a community of adults who learn and work together. Social scientists call this a “community of practice.”

- **Include provisions for disconnected youth in economic recovery and infrastructure investments and programs.**

Investments geared to economic recovery should incorporate efforts to help out-of-school youth get the training and supports they need to secure sustainable, family-supporting employment.

Accompany job creation with investments in workforce development geared to disconnected youth. These investments should be geared to local jobs that have been created. They should include: pre-apprenticeship programs leading to certified apprenticeships; bridge and career pathways programs; transitional jobs; and corps models. Other critical services include job referral and placement and supportive services, including child care (Center for Law and Social Policy, 2009).

Provide the supports that allow vulnerable youth to participate in job training.

Young people who have no families to fall back on, including those leaving foster care, those with special needs, and those without English-language proficiency, often need more intensive supports to participate successfully in training programs. These supports may include stipends, health care, and/or child care (Osgood et al., 2005).

Foster the sustainability of intermediary-run workforce development projects. Over the last decade, workforce development efforts have increasingly favored programs that are run by intermediaries, focus on a single industry or sector, and provide a wide range of education, training, and support services. These projects address two shortcomings of earlier models: They recognize that short-term workforce initiatives cannot address the complex issues that keep low-skill young adults out of the workforce, and they take a “dual-customer” approach, engaging employers as well as potential workers. The assumption has been that employers would subsidize such programs, based on a demonstrated return on investment. Given evidence that employers will provide some but not all of the resources needed, projects need to improve their ability to manage complex funding streams and operating structures (Griffen, 2008).

- **Address obstacles to employment.**

In neighborhoods with entrenched poverty, the kinds of infrastructure and services that people need in order to find and sustain employment may be limited. Workforce development efforts need to help young people address barriers to work, including physical and mental health problems, drug and alcohol addictions, domestic violence, or limited English proficiency. The abuse and neglect of teens tends to be underreported and underestimated as a problem (Simpson, 2001; Finkelhor et al., 2005). Practical or legal problems, such as inadequate transportation, lack of child care, immigration problems, or criminal records, may also impede employment.

Address the health needs of vulnerable youth and young adults. It is often assumed that young adults are healthy and can work at full throttle without medical attention. This has never been true and is especially unrealistic today. A large study that followed young people over a six-year period, from adolescence to young adulthood, found that the current generation has experienced a marked, unprecedented decline in health during the transition to young adulthood. Across sex and racial/ethnic groups, there were increases in health risks and disparities, as well as a rise in the number of young people who need but cannot afford health care (Harris et al., 2006). Young adults make up a large proportion of Americans without health coverage, and young men have very high odds of being uninsured. One study showed that over a two-year period, more than one-half of all young men between ages 18 and 25 (and two-thirds between ages 21 and 23) are uninsured (Levy, 2007). Typically, these young people have aged out of their parents' plans, are ineligible for public plans geared to children, and lack their own job benefits. Three factors are making it more likely that young adults will lack health insurance: job instability among young adults is more prevalent, the transition from school to stable employment takes longer, and fewer jobs are offering health insurance (Levy, 2007). As health reform proceeds, policymakers need to pay particular attention to young adults, especially those with disabilities or chronic illnesses (White & Galloway, 2005).

Help youth and young adults sustain the stable lives and routines needed to succeed in the workforce. Stable housing is a major concern for many low-income youth. Many “couch surf”—going from one friend or relative’s home to another for a few days at a time. Providing stable housing to disconnected youth increases their odds of connecting with the worlds of school and work (Chen et al., 2006). But housing is not enough. Many disconnected youth lack the life skills needed to maintain a household, such as renting an apartment, opening a bank account, paying bills, planning and preparing meals, or making a doctor’s appointment.

Address the needs of the foreign-born. Foreign-born adolescents and young adults are three times more likely than their native-born peers to be disconnected from education or work (21 percent vs. 7 percent). Foreign-born young adults are three times more likely to lack a high school credential by age 24 than their native-born peers (Rosch et al., 2008). If they are employed, they are more likely to stay in low-wage, low-skilled jobs throughout their working lives (Rosch et al., 2008). These young people need services and supports that take into account the logistical, legal, and linguistic impediments to involvement with education or jobs.

Support place-based efforts to improve employment opportunities. A frequent finding of employment programs for disadvantaged people is that family members and partners who do not work can undermine the efforts of those who try (Dressner, Fleischer & Sherwood, 1998). It is often advantageous for employment programs to serve entire families and social networks—not just individuals.

- **Provide developmental opportunities that recognize the importance of social networks.**

Young people who are cut off from mainstream opportunities and networks need connection to positive adult role models, a wider range of social networks, and chances to become engaged in community or civic affairs (Finlay et al., 2007). Sustained relationships with adults in the community can help students thrive despite adverse conditions. Mentors can also help young people make the transition from school to work.

Support efforts to strengthen families. Researchers are confirming what parents have long known: Young adults need help and support from their families. Families can support successful transition to adulthood not only by providing guidance and emotional support, but also by providing material help (tuition, food, and housing) and social networks (contacts that lead to job providing educational opportunities). Youth whose families have fewer economic resources and fewer social connections face the greatest obstacles (Markow et al., 2006).

Provide focused assistance to youth aging out of foster care. Many 18-year-olds leave the foster care system without a lasting family connection and at risk for later hardship. For these vulnerable young people, job training is not sufficient. These young people need comprehensive preparation for adulthood—a sustained, systematic, developmentally appropriate approach to helping them transition successfully to independence and gain the wide range of skills they need to successfully continue their education and/or make initial steps on a career path. Effective, individualized planning and case management are keys to this approach (Frey, Greenblatt & Brown, 2007).

Provide opportunities for civic engagement. A positive approach to youth development stresses the contributions that all young people can make to their communities. Community service and civic engagement have been found to increase the odds that youth will have positive role models and adults to whom they can turn for help and connection to social networks. Every community has some “natural helpers”—neighbors, faith leaders, and other community members who make themselves available to mentor young people. However, intensive efforts are needed to ensure that all teens and young adults have the caring adults and institutional opportunities that support civic engagement. Young people who attend schools in high-poverty neighborhoods may have fewer opportunities for service or civic engagement. Those whose families are economically marginalized, those who need to contribute to household income, and those who provide child or elder care at home, may find it harder to do service work (Finlay et al., 2007).

Support “natural helpers” in communities that are home to many disconnected youth. Young people can benefit from initiatives that provide resources and support to natural helpers. Compared with earlier generations, today’s young people are more likely to rely on their families for financial help, health insurance, or housing, especially in times of economic slowdown. But some parents lack the resources to provide this help,

and some young people have no families to fall back on. Professionals can provide specific services needed by disconnected youth, but may not always understand contextual issues or know how to be most helpful. They may not speak the same language (literally or figuratively) as the young people they are trying to assist. People who live in the community, often working in collaboration with professionals, can often provide effective assistance or mentoring. They can serve as “translators” to explain how formal societal systems work – schools, jobs, or the courts. They often are available on a more long-term basis than program staff (Sanders & Munford, 2007).

- **Aim for comprehensive reform, with a focus on cross-system collaboration.**

Many kinds of youth development programs and policies are designed to keep young people engaged in productive activities, or re-engage those who are disconnected from school or work. Efforts to reach and re-connect struggling youth require collaboration across all youth-serving systems, including school districts, foster care agencies, pregnancy prevention initiatives, juvenile justice, workforce development, and social service agencies (Harris, 2005, Moore, 2007). All of these approaches can be effective, but for young people in our nation’s toughest communities, a patchwork of programs is not sufficient. More fundamental change is required (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004; Moore, 2007).

Include youth in decision-making about policies and programs designed to re-engage disconnected young people. The voices of young people need to be heard and taken fully into account in the planning and implementation of policies and programs that affect them. This is not simply a matter of political correctness. Young people often have keen insight into the factors that can promote or impede engagement in schools, jobs, and communities (Frey & Brown, 2007; Sanders & Munford, 2007).

Open dialogue among youth-serving organizations to ensure that no one falls through the cracks. According to a report by the National League of Cities, “Simply opening a dialogue about the gaps between public systems serving young people can yield major dividends” and that “the benefits of collaboration become evident even when as few as two key agencies start working together” (Moore, 2007, p. 3). These discussions should include not only educational and work opportunities, but also access to housing, nutrition, and health care.

Work toward cross-system collaboration, with one agency anchoring youth-in-transition services. This effort cannot only lead to better coordinated, and more effective services; it can also increase attention to the challenges of disconnected youth (Moore, 2007). A lead agency or intermediary (such as a Task Force) can provide a context and process for cross-system efforts. It can also coordinate the process of recalibrating funding based on changing needs for prevention and intervention.

Work toward simultaneous changes in many youth-serving systems, as well as changes in the relationships among those systems. Experience from The Annie E.

Casey Foundation's New Futures initiative and other projects suggests that improving outcomes for youth requires fundamental and deep changes in existing institutions and systems, such as school districts, child welfare agencies, juvenile justice systems, and other youth-serving institutions. In part, this may involve reorienting human service systems and resources to the neighborhood level, with local residents taking the lead in planning, implementing, and staffing all human service and community building activities. This kind of comprehensive system-reform agenda is immensely difficult to achieve. It is difficult to communicate clearly the aim, design, and expectations of this kind of complex, multifaceted effort. And it is very hard to manage a change process that depends upon diverse parts of the community for success. Systemic change necessitates the development of collaborative governing bodies. It requires considerable time and resources and sustained effort. However, the alternative—merely providing or augmenting direct services—cannot fully succeed (Nelson, 1996).

Address the needs of youth who are leaving the juvenile justice system.

Youth offenders need pre-release and post-release programs to help them move toward productive lives when they leave the criminal justice system. Transitional employment programs can be effective when they encompass job readiness classes; temporary, supervised jobs; help finding permanent jobs; and services to promote retention (Bloom et al., 2007). As things stand, there are few effective institutional linkages among the criminal justice system, the educational system, and employers (Urban Institute, 2006).

In conclusion, to succeed, all of these efforts must recognize that disconnected youth often reflect the problems of disconnected communities. There are tens of thousands of rural, urban, and suburban neighborhoods in America, but many of the worst outcomes for young people are concentrated in several hundred of our most isolated, tough neighborhoods. In these neighborhoods, youth inactivity and unemployment are often caused or aggravated by a web of related problems—family problems, poor education, inadequate health care, fragmented social services, racism, and crime. Reducing the number of disconnected youth requires intensive, sustained efforts to reverse the social isolation and disenfranchisement of low-income neighborhoods.

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Online resources:

Alternative High School Initiative (AHSI)

www.ahsi.info

American Youth Policy Forum

www.aypf.org

Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)

www.clasp.org

Forum for Youth Investment

www.forumforyouthinvestment.org

Institute for Youth Development

(703) 471-8750

www.youthdevelopment.org

Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative

www.jimcaseyyouth.org

Jobs for the Future (JFF)

www.jff.org

National League of Cities Institute for Youth, Education, and Families

www.nlc.org/iyef

Welfare Information Network

www.welfareinfo.org