# RACE matters

Unequal Opportunities for YOUTH IN TRANSITION

Why Equal Opportunity is Important

■ We know what it takes for youth to make a successful transition to adulthood: graduation from quality schools, some form of higher education, skills and habits to be productive learners and workers, good jobs that offer economic security.

■ The consequences of unsuccessful transitions are far-reaching. Lack of success at school contributes to juvenile system involvement and early pregnancy, consequences that can reverberate over a lifetime by inhibiting youths' ability to complete school and find family supporting employment.

■ Embedded racial inequities produce barriers to youths' prospects for successful transition. Systematic policies, practices, and stereotypes work against youth of color to undermine their strengths, deplete their resilience, and compromise their outcomes. We need to understand the consequences of embedded racial inequities, how they are produced, and how they can be challenged to ensure that all youth have the opportunity to make a successful transition to adulthood.
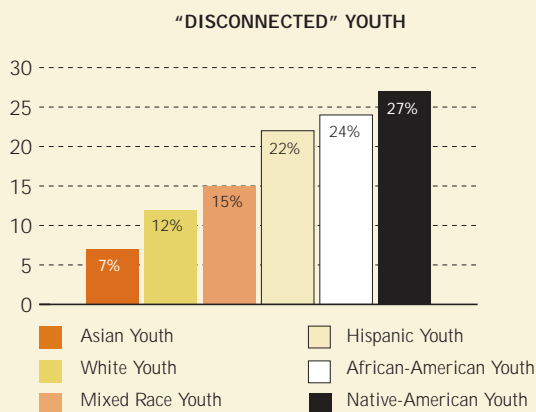
Barriers to Equal Opportunity

■ Poverty. Poverty is a strong predictor of challenges confronting youth transitioning to adulthood. Because African American, Latino, and Native American youth are proportionally more likely than White youth to live in poverty, they are also more likely to face significant challenges in the transition to adulthood.

■ Spatial segregation. The de facto residential segregation experienced by low-income families of color translates into the segregation of their children in under-resourced schools where dropout rates are high and educational quality is often inadequate. Exclusionary zoning laws and real estate steering inhibit the opportunity for these families of color to seek better schools. And school funding arrangements that rely significantly on local property taxes exacerbate schooling inequities. Further, neighborhood segregation inhibits the opportunity to craft diverse social networks that are linked to educational and employment opportunities.

■ Racial stereotyping and discrimination. The use of racial stereotypes in decision-making within various public systems produces more negative decisions against youth of color in comparison to their White counterparts, even when they face the same circumstances and have comparable backgrounds. The more discretionary the decision-making structure, or the more likely quick decisions are made, the more likely youth of color suffer from unfair assessments and dispositions.

■ Cultural incompetence. High school and after-school curricula, youth services, and mentoring that fail to connect to the strengths and challenges of low-income youth, families, and communities of color are unlikely to be successful in achieving their stated goals. Decision-making too often fails to appreciate family and community cultural strengths, thereby underestimating the resourcefulness of these entities for youth success.

"DISCONNECTED" YOUTH

- Asian Youth — 7%
- White Youth — 12%
- Mixed Race Youth — 15%
- Hispanic Youth — 22%
- African-American Youth — 24%
- Native-American Youth — 27%

(See Disconnected Youth, p.2)

RACE
matters

The Consequences of Unequal Opportunity

- **"Disconnected" youth.**[1] Youth of color are less likely to make the successful transition to adulthood. The percentage of disconnected youth – 18 to 24 year olds who are not presently enrolled in school, not currently working and have no degree beyond a high school diploma or GED – within each racial and ethnic group (see chart, p.1).

- **Quality High School Education.** Graduation from high school is a critical step on which to build the next phase of a youth's life. Yet, students of color have less access to quality education than White youth. They are more likely to attend schools that are less resourced in terms of equipment and curricular materials,[2] have larger classes,[3] use more teachers teaching out of subject area,[4] offer a more limited curriculum,[5] and employ less experienced teachers.[6] These situations put poor and minority youth at significant academic disadvantage and retard their future education and employment prospects.

- **Lower completion levels.** High school graduation rates are substantially lower for minority groups than they are for non-minorities. The Harvard Civil Rights Project reports that only about half of African American, Latino, and Native American students graduated on time, compared to about three-quarters of Whites and Asian Americans in 2001.[7]

- **Fair Employment Practices.** Limited entry-level jobs and discriminatory employer practices produce a significant number of youth of color who "aren't working." Research shows that employers favor White job applicants who said they had a felony conviction more than comparable Black applicants with no criminal record at all.[8]

- **Juvenile system involvement.** When compared to White youth committing comparable offenses, African American, Latino/a and Native American youth experience differentially punitive treatment in terms of profiling, arrests, referral to juvenile court, detention, formal processing, waiver to adult court, incarceration in juvenile facilities, and incarceration in adult facilities. Even when White and African American youth with no prior admissions are charged with the same offense, African-American youth are six times more likely than White youth to be incarcerated. Latino youth are three times more likely.[9]

- **Early parenthood.** Because less than one in three teen mothers ever finishes high school, they are more vulnerable to living in poverty in adulthood.[10] Most youth of color have higher teen birth rates than White youth. In 1999 the birth rate per 1,000 teens aged 15 to 19 was 19 for Asian Pacific Islanders, 25 for Whites, 45 for American Indians, 58 for Blacks, and 83 for Hispanics.[11]

Strategies to Promote Equal Opportunity

- **Racial equity impact analyses.** The Race Matters Toolkit includes an instrument that can be used to assess policy development and implementation to ensure that racial equity is not left to chance. Leaving it to "chance" is likely to perpetuate racial inequity because of the deep-seated ways in which barriers to opportunity operate routinely and inadvertently in systems.

- **Change of policies and practices that contribute to disparities/disproportionality.** See the Fact Sheets in this Toolkit on Education, Juvenile Justice, and Adolescent Reproductive Health for specific ideas about policy and practice reform.

- **Development of policies and use of assessment tools that minimize the chance of racial discrimination.** Wherever discretion in decision-making occurs, the opportunity for bias exists. Policies and tools that minimize the chance of bias tend to focus on behaviors rather than abstract evaluations and demonstrate an appreciation for the specific cultural strengths of families and communities of color.

- **Enforcement of existing non-discrimination laws.** Whether the issue is fair employment or fair housing for youth transitioning to adulthood, laws exist to ensure non-discrimination. These should be actively enforced by relevant authorities and oversight bodies, which may require strengthening enforcement staff.

- **Equitable resource bases.** Funding for essential systems like schools must be distributed to ensure the resources necessary for all children to succeed. Given class and race segregation, this suggests that regions, states and the federal government should play larger roles than local jurisdictions in revenue production and distribution.

- **Mobilization for systems changes.** Most programming for "at-risk youth" focuses on human capital development. Youth development should also promote youth political mobilization, since key sources of the inequities youth face are system-based and may require coordinated advocacy to produce change.

1. U.S. Census Bureau. 2002. American Community Survey (ACS).

2. National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. 2003. "No Dream Denied: A Pledge to America's Children," 6 (Washington, DC).

3. U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics, "School and Staffing Survey, 1999–2000." As cited in Paul E. Barton, "Parsing the Achievement Gap: Baselines for Tracking Progress."

4. Jerald, Craig. 2002. "All Talk, No Action: Putting an End to Out-of-Field Teaching" (Washington, DC: The Education Trust).

5. National Research Council, Donovan M. and Cross, C, Eds., "Minority Students in Special and Gifted Education" (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2002): p. 51.

6. U.S. Department of Education, National Center on Education Statistics, Condition of Education 2003 (Washington, DC).

7. http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/dropouts/call_dropoutpapers.php.

8. Pager, Devah. 2002. "The Mark of a Criminal Record." *American Journal of Sociology* 108(5): 937–975.

9. Hinton Hoytt, et. al., "Reducing Racial Disparities in Juvenile Detention." In Pathways to Juvenile Detention Reform Series, Annie E Casey Foundation.

10. National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. 2003. "With One Voice: America's Adults and Teens Sound Out About Teen Pregnancy." Washington, DC.

11. Ventura, S., et. al. 1999. "Declines in Teenage Birth Rates, 1991–1998: Update of National and State Trends." *National Vital Statistics Reports*, 47 (26).