

FIVE THINGS | to Know about Youth not Employed or in School

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Autonomy is a necessary [developmental milestone](#) for adolescents and young adults. As they pursue greater autonomy, young people are also [disposed biologically](#) to begin taking greater risks, which for some youth can be particularly detrimental, such as unprotected sexual activity, truancy, or experimentation with drugs and alcohol. Not surprisingly, then, adolescence is a time during which rates of [teenage pregnancy](#), [running away](#), [school dropout](#), and [juvenile justice involvement](#) increase.



These, in turn, can result in disconnection from important institutions that help prepare youth for a successful transition to full independence.

As recently as 2012, there were approximately [6.7 million youth in the United States](#) who were not enrolled in school and who had been disconnected from the workforce for at least six months. That represents about 17 percent of the 16-to-24 age group nationally. Sometimes referred to as "opportunity youth" or "disconnected youth," this population is among the hardest to reach with traditional social interventions. Yet, there is an emerging body of practice and literature that suggests these young people can be successfully reconnected to meaningful opportunities. Here's what we know:

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The population of disconnected youth is diverse.

The definition of disconnected youth can be misleading to the extent that it suggests dropout status and connection to the workforce are the only distinguishing factors of these young people. Several subgroups exist within the population of disconnected youth. A [primary distinction](#) can be made between "chronically" disconnected youth, who have not been in school or work since age 16, and "under-attached" youth, who have not completed college or maintained a job despite some intermittent connection to school and/or work. Beyond chronic disconnection and under-attachment, [research](#) suggests there are three distinct segments of disconnected youth: 1) young high school dropouts (ages 16-18); 2) older high school dropouts (ages 19-24); and 3) youth with diplomas or GEDs who are disconnected from postsecondary education and the labor market (ages 19-24). One can

further distinguish youth who are close and far from graduation based on the number of credits still needed. Disconnected youth may also be distinguished by factors such as teen parenthood, immigration status, mental or physical disability, juvenile justice or child welfare involvement, and homelessness.



Disconnection from school and work is often associated with connection to public and other systems that present challenges and opportunities.

Disconnected youth are more likely than their peers to be involved in several systems that present obstacles to future success. Thankfully, these systems can also be leveraged to get youth back on track. For example, [63 percent of crimes](#) committed by 16- to 24-year-olds are perpetrated by disconnected youth, leading to disproportionate representation in the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Reforms like [investing in alternatives](#) to juvenile detention and approaches like [Positive Youth Justice](#) are gaining momentum and helping provide transformative opportunities for court-involved youth. Disconnected youth often face multiple barriers to sustained employment (e.g., lack of affordable transportation, child care costs, limited education). Even those who have been employed are likely to have held [seasonal and low-wage jobs](#). Consequently, they are more likely to connect with [informal labor markets](#). This pseudo-connection to the labor market may undermine motivation to re-engage in formal institutions of work or education. Understanding local informal labor markets and the needs these markets meet for disconnected youth can provide useful insights into how to recruit and support these youth. Finally, disconnected youth's lack of education and employment leads a disproportionate number of them to draw on [public assistance](#) compared with their peers. While this assistance represents a short-term cost to society, it can also provide the lift needed for some disconnected youth to re-engage with school or work. At least, involvement with systems providing public assistance represents a point of connection between disconnected youth and more comprehensive efforts to support them.



"Connecting" disconnected youth could result in significant societal savings and individual benefits.

Nationally, unserved disconnected youth represent a devastating forfeiture of human potential and enormous financial costs (i.e., potential savings). Youth who do not finish high school [earn less and subsequently pay significantly less in taxes than graduates](#). Further, they [consume more public benefits and are more likely to engage in delinquent and criminal acts](#). The estimated cohort of 6.7 million young people cited earlier resulted in a staggering [cost of \\$93 billion](#) to U.S. taxpayers in 2011. These are only economic costs—those that result directly in increased public expenditure or forfeiture, such as a decreased tax base or increased expenditure on prisons—and do not include social costs including reduced individual earnings and pain and suffering associated with crime victimization, among other things. Recent research estimates that each disconnected youth costs taxpayers about [\\$236,000 over their lifetime](#) and that the social costs are at least \$704,000. When social factors are considered, the lifetime estimated cost of the current 6.7 million disconnected youth is [\\$3.6](#)

[trillion](#).



Improving prospects for disconnected youth requires coordinated solutions.

Because of the diversity of young people in the population of disconnected youth, communities seeking to address their needs would do well to craft approaches that integrate resources from across multiple stakeholder groups (e.g., schools, businesses, mental health, juvenile justice). For these young people, there are often [multiple circumstances](#) that might lead to disconnection. A parenting teen might drop out of school because she cannot afford child care and her school does not provide care for the child during the school day. A young adult with a GED might struggle to find and sustain employment because of a criminal record. These complex needs require multiple routes to reconnection, or "[on-ramps](#)," that can only be provided through multi-sector partnerships (e.g., credit recovery programs, affordable child care for teen parents, data sharing between local employers and job training providers). In fact, the White House Council for Community Solutions has recommended [cross-sector collaboration](#) as a vital component of strategies to improve the prospects of disconnected youth. Research now exists that outlines elements associated with [effective community collaboratives](#), and particularly [those aimed at improving outcomes for disconnected youth](#).



Disconnected youth want to be connected.

Youth who are out of work and not in school are not lost causes. More than half of disconnected youth report that they are [actively seeking employment](#) and almost all of them say that having a good career is important to them. Likewise, completing college or obtaining a technical certification is important to most disconnected youth, though various barriers exist (e.g., money, transportation, application process). Given the appropriate opportunities and supports, these young people can achieve the success they envision for themselves. In fact, there are [several pioneering organizations](#) throughout the country that are creating meaningful opportunities for disconnected youth. There is a [national movement](#) to catalyze efforts, including organizations such as the [Aspen Institute's Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund](#) aimed at delivering high-quality, coordinated support to disconnected youth across the country. The Social Innovation Fund is also supporting projects like [youthCONNECT](#) that are helping advance the field's knowledge about what works to prevent and address disconnection. As results of these efforts become available, it will be important for the field to document the circumstances under which partnerships thrive and disconnected youth achieve positive outcomes.

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