



MEASUREOFAMERICA
of the Social Science Research Council

ONE IN SEVEN

RANKING YOUTH
DISCONNECTION IN
THE 25 LARGEST
METRO AREAS

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Conrad N. Hilton
FOUNDATION

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ONE IN SEVEN

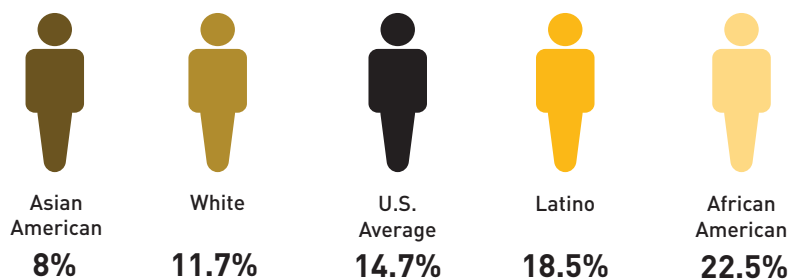
Ranking Youth Disconnection in the 25 Largest Metro Areas

All around the country, the rhythms of the academic year have begun. Recent college grads lucky enough to have jobs in this tough market are growing accustomed to the cadence of the working world, with its new structure, new social connections, and the start of a new identity.

But some young Americans are not part of September's yearly promise of new beginnings. An astonishing one in seven American adolescents and young adults ages 16 to 24 is neither working nor in school; we call such status "disconnected." This isolation from society's anchor structures is costly to individuals, communities, and the country as a whole. This paper ranks the country's twenty-five most populous metropolitan areas—and racial and ethnic groups within those areas—in terms of youth disconnection. Key findings include the following:

- The youth disconnection rate is 14.7 percent for the country as a whole—5.8 million young people in all. This number swelled by over 800,000 during the Great Recession.
- Of the twenty-five largest metropolitan areas, Boston and Minneapolis–St. Paul perform the best, with fewer than one in ten young people disconnected from the worlds of school and work. In Phoenix, the bottom-ranking city, nearly one in five is disconnected.
- Of the country's major racial and ethnic groups, African Americans have the highest rate of youth disconnection, at 22.5 percent. Pittsburgh, Seattle, Detroit, and Phoenix have the highest African American rates: more than one in four African American young people are disconnected. Latinos have the second-highest national youth disconnection rate, at 18.5 percent. In Boston, New York, and Phoenix, more than one in five Latino young people are disconnected.

Youth Disconnection Rate by Race and Ethnicity



- Young men are more likely to be disconnected than young women. However, among Latinos ages 16 to 24, women have higher rates of disconnection than men.

Youth disconnection mirrors adult disconnection. Household poverty rates and the employment and educational status of community adults are strongly associated with youth disconnection. The paper concludes by exploring strategies and programs that have increased youth connection at home and abroad.

Introduction

All around the country, the rhythms of the academic year have begun anew. College students are back on campus. High schoolers are settling in to their classes and reconnecting with old friends, teachers, and coaches. Recent grads lucky enough to have found jobs in this tough market are growing accustomed to the cadence of the working world, which has brought to their lives new structure, new social connections, and the start of a new identity.

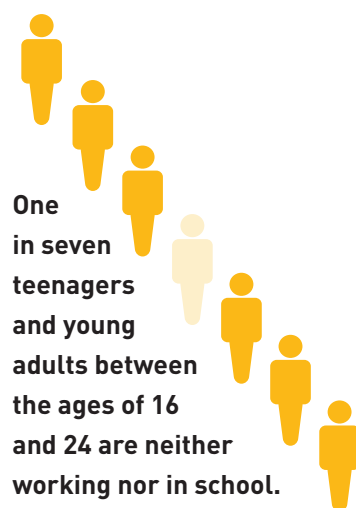
But some young Americans are not part of September's yearly promise of new beginnings. Nor are they embarking on careers and adjusting to the expectations of the workplace. **Nationwide, more than 5.8 million young people—about one in seven teenagers and young adults between the ages of 16 and 24—are neither working nor in school.** Rather than laying the foundation for a productive life of choice and value, these disconnected youth find themselves adrift at society's margins, unmoored from the systems and structures that confer knowledge, skills, identity, and purpose.

The problem of youth disconnection is serious and costly, both for young people themselves and for society. It is also a problem that worsened significantly during the Great Recession; after a decade of relatively stable rates, the rolls of the disconnected surged by over 800,000 young people between 2007 and 2010.

Emerging adulthood, the years that stretch from the late teens to the mid-twenties, is a critical period for forming one's adult identity and moving toward independence and self-sufficiency.¹ The effects of disconnection—limited education, social exclusion, lack of work experience, and fewer opportunities to develop mentors and valuable work connections—at this juncture can have long-term consequences that snowball across the life course, coming to affect everything from earnings and self-sufficiency to physical and mental health and marital prospects.

For society, the consequences are also grave: a labor force with too few skilled workers to compete in today's globalized, knowledge-based economy; greater need for public assistance; the high costs of crime, incarceration, and poor physical and mental health; and a heightened risk that the next generation will be caught in the same cycle. The bottom line: direct support costs and lost tax revenues associated with adrift young people set U.S. taxpayers back by more than \$93 billion in 2011 alone.² And this bill compounds as time goes on.

Disconnected youth are young people ages 16–24 who are not in school and not working.



Evolving social norms coupled with a labor market that now demands more educated workers have made the transition to a successful adulthood a lengthier, costlier, and more complicated process than it was in the past. A generation ago, young men had a variety of clear, accessible pathways to jobs that could support a family. Even boys who did not complete high school could find a role in manufacturing, on a farm, in the family business, or in the military, and jobs available to such teenagers often progressed into lifelong careers. This brief will show that this group of boys and young men in today's economy face the greatest challenges. In 1960, the unemployment rate for men aged 16 to 19 was around 15 percent, half what it is today for that age group. The rate for men 20 and older was just 4.7 percent.³ The typical age at first marriage was roughly 20 years for women and 23 years for men,⁴ and children often soon followed. These norms had significant downsides, of course: girls and women had limited access to higher education and few employment opportunities. In addition, discriminatory laws and practices blocked African Americans' access to a wide range of educational and career paths.

Today, markers of adulthood, the sequence for acquiring them, and expectations about the timeline for doing so are no longer widely shared.⁵ Social norms around marriage, childbearing, caregiving, and female labor force participation have changed dramatically as well. These changes have been beneficial in some ways and detrimental in others. They have broadened the range of opportunities available to young people, particularly to young women, to live freely chosen lives and to fulfill their potential. Yet shifts in the labor market have served to diminish the opportunities open to young people with limited education; very few career ladders today have bottom rungs that a teenager with a high school diploma or less could hope to reach.

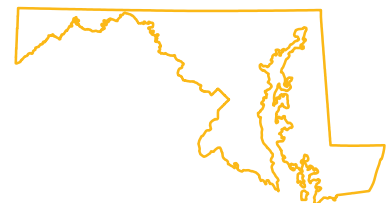
However, while some study beyond high school is now absolutely necessary for economic security, the "college for all" mantra—with college understood as a four-year bachelor's degree—is blocking out meaningful alternatives for some young adults and sending the message that anything else is second best. More constructive approaches would involve creating robust pathways to certificate or associate degree programs linked to apprenticeships, job placement, and other supports, and destigmatizing both career and technical high school programs and postsecondary options that do not include a four-year degree.

Examples of education and workforce development programs that are successfully addressing these needs and offering young people viable alternatives appear below.

Though public debate about the transition to adulthood has been dominated of late by considerable handwringing about overinvolved



The United States has **5.8 million** disconnected youth—a figure roughly on par with the entire population of Wisconsin or Maryland.



“helicopter parents,” this paper focuses on young people whose families and communities lack many of the resources, skills, social networks, and level of public investment required to shepherd them through this critical period of life. They are the young people most in need of innovative strategies and targeted investments to harness and direct their talents. The pages that follow explore the degree to which young people in our country’s largest metropolitan areas are making the transition to a productive adulthood, why some groups are being left behind, and what might be done to foster greater youth connection.

Measure of America, a project of the Social Science Research Council, is a nonpartisan project to provide easy-to-use, yet methodologically sound tools for understanding well-being and opportunity in the United States and to stimulate fact-based dialogue about issues we all care about: **health**, **education**, and **living standards**.

The root of this work is the human development and capabilities approach, the brainchild of Harvard professor and Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen. Human development is about improving people’s well-being and expanding their choices and opportunities to live freely chosen lives of value. The period of young adulthood is critical to developing the capabilities required to live a good life: knowledge and credentials, social skills and networks, a sense of mastery and agency, an understanding of one’s strengths and preferences, and the ability to handle stressful events and regulate one’s emotions, to name just a few. Measure of America is thus concerned with youth disconnection because it stunts human development, closing off some of life’s most rewarding and joyful paths and leading to a future of limited horizons and unrealized potential.

Who Are America's Disconnected Youth?

Connected Youth

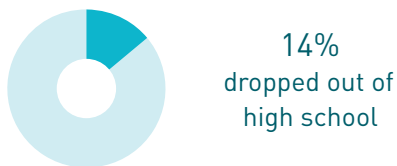
33,691,218
young adults



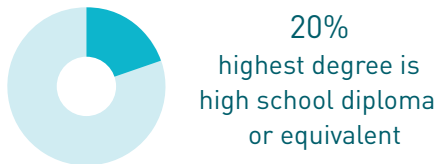
POVERTY



EDUCATION



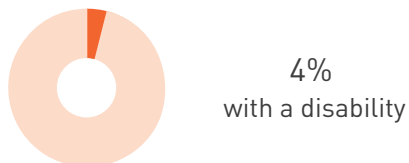
EDUCATION



YOUNG MOTHERHOOD



DISABILITY



Disconnected Youth

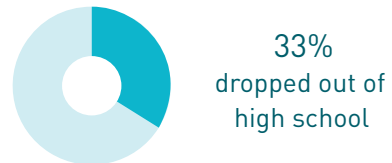
5,808,827
young adults



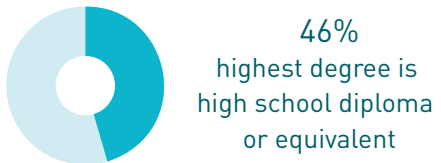
POVERTY



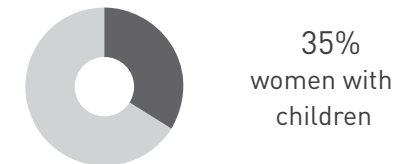
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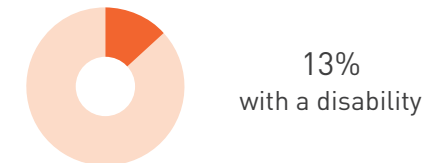
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YOUNG MOTHERHOOD



DISABILITY



Source: Measure of America analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2010 PUMS Microdata.
Note: Women with children includes biological, step, and adopted children.

What Do the Numbers Show?

This section explores the question of youth disconnection from several different angles, making comparisons by major U.S. metropolitan area; by race, ethnicity, and gender; and within the international context of other affluent democracies. **BOX 1** on page 13 contains a detailed discussion of who is included in the disconnected youth category.

DISCONNECTED YOUTH: METROPOLITAN AREA RANKINGS

The country's twenty-five most populous metropolitan areas (see **TABLE 2**) are home to roughly 40 percent of Americans. On the whole, people living in these metropolitan areas—twenty-five central cities and the surrounding towns, suburbs, and exurbs that have significant economic and social ties to that core city—enjoy higher levels of well-being than the average American, making the plight of disconnected youth there more poignant—but also offering hope for change.

- **The top-performing metro areas** are Boston (9 percent), Minneapolis–St. Paul (9.3 percent), San Diego (11.1 percent), Washington, DC (11.3 percent), and Philadelphia (11.9 percent).
- The metro areas with the **highest rates of youth disconnection** are Atlanta (16.9 percent), Riverside–San Bernardino (16.9 percent), Detroit (17 percent), Miami (17.1 percent), and in last place, Phoenix (18.8 percent), where nearly one out of every five young people is disengaged from the structure and meaning that school and work bring to daily life.

Least Disconnection

1. Boston
2. Minneapolis–St. Paul
3. San Diego
4. Washington, DC
5. Philadelphia

Most Disconnection

21. Atlanta
22. Riverside–San Bernardino
23. Detroit
24. Miami
25. Phoenix

TABLE 1 Neighborhood Variation within Select Metro Areas

	OVERALL	LEAST DISCONNECTED NEIGHBORHOOD	MOST DISCONNECTED NEIGHBORHOOD		
METRO AREA	DISCONNECTED YOUTH (%)				
Boston	9.0	Allston, Brighton, Fenway, Kenmore	3.2	City of Brockton	18.4
Los Angeles	14.2	West LA	3.5	Watts	25.1
New York	15.2	Parts of Nassau County	3.7	Parts of the South Bronx	35.6
San Francisco	12.4	Berkeley	3.3	Oakland-Elmhurst	25.0
Washington, DC	11.3	Northwest Washington, DC	2.9	Southeast Washington, DC	33.1

Source: Measure of America analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey PUMS Microdata 2006–2010.

TABLE 2 Disconnected Youth in the 25 Largest Metro Areas, by Race and Ethnicity

RANK	METRO AREA	ALL	AFRICAN AMERICAN	ASIAN AMERICAN	LATINO	WHITE
		DISCONNECTED YOUTH (%)				
	United States	14.7	22.5	8.0	18.5	11.7
1	Boston	9.0	13.1	...	20.2	6.6
2	Minneapolis–St. Paul	9.3	22.5	...	...	7.2
3	San Diego	11.1	12.1	5.7	13.3	9.1
4	Washington, DC	11.3	19.0	7.6	11.7	7.0
5	Philadelphia	11.9	19.7	...	19.2	8.0
6	Pittsburgh	11.9	26.3	...	...	9.4
7	San Francisco	12.4	19.7	7.1	17.9	7.9
8	Chicago	13.3	24.0	...	16.1	8.1
9	Denver	13.4	15.8	...	19.1	11.0
10	St. Louis	13.4	23.1	...	...	10.6
11	Dallas–Ft. Worth	14.2	21.4	...	16.5	10.3
12	Los Angeles	14.2	21.0	7.6	17.1	10.2
13	Baltimore	14.2	22.1	...	18.4	9.7
14	Sacramento	14.3	17.9	...	18.8	12.3
15	Portland	14.3	...	...	18.0	13.5
16	Seattle	14.7	26.9	...	19.5	13.3
17	New York	15.2	21.7	9.8	20.6	9.8
18	Tampa–St. Petersburg	15.7	16.8	...	19.7	13.3
19	Houston	15.7	20.6	8.5	17.2	12.2
20	San Antonio	15.9	...	...	17.2	11.6
21	Atlanta	16.9	23.2	...	19.4	12.0
22	Riverside–San Bernardino	16.9	21.4	...	18.5	14.5
23	Detroit	17.0	25.3	...	19.2	13.5
24	Miami	17.1	23.3	...	17.0	12.5
25	Phoenix	18.8	28.2	...	23.5	13.3

... Data unavailable because there are too few 16- to 24-year-olds to allow for reliable calculations.

Source: Measure of America analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2010 PUMS Microdata.

In addition to uneven rates of disconnection from one city to another, wide disparities are in evidence within each of these metro areas by neighborhood clusters, ranging from parts of Delaware County in the Philadelphia metro area, where only 2.6 percent of youth are disconnected, to Mott Haven, Melrose, and Hunts Point in the South Bronx, New York City, where the corresponding rate is 35.6 percent.

TABLE 1 offers a snapshot of the greatest neighborhood variation in five large metro areas. These neighborhoods are defined by the U.S. Census Bureau and are referred to as Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs). They contain at least 100,000 people, and most are under 200,000.

As the ranking table demonstrates, significant variation exists within metro areas by race and ethnicity. In the five metro areas at the bottom of the ranking, for example, the youth disconnection rate for whites is lower than the national average. Variation by neighborhood within metro areas can also span a considerable range. A closer look at top-ranked Boston provides a vivid illustration. The Boston metro area has the lowest rate of youth disconnection of the twenty-five largest cities. However, in marked contrast to Boston's 9 percent overall average, in the areas of Mission Hill and Roxbury, over 16 percent of young people are disconnected, and the rates in East Boston, Revere, Winthrop, and the City of Brockton are even higher.

Several points underlie these statistics (see **TABLE 3**). One is that comparatively few adults in these areas have completed a four-year college degree. Another is that these areas have a higher proportion of people of color than other parts of Boston. While Boston is first overall in low rates of disconnected youth, among Latinos, Boston ranks third from the bottom, with youth disconnection rates just above that of New York and Phoenix. Latino youth in the Boston metro area are more than twice as likely as other young Bostonians to be out of school and work, and three times as likely as Boston whites. The predominantly African American neighborhoods of Mission Hill and Roxbury struggle with high adult unemployment rates.

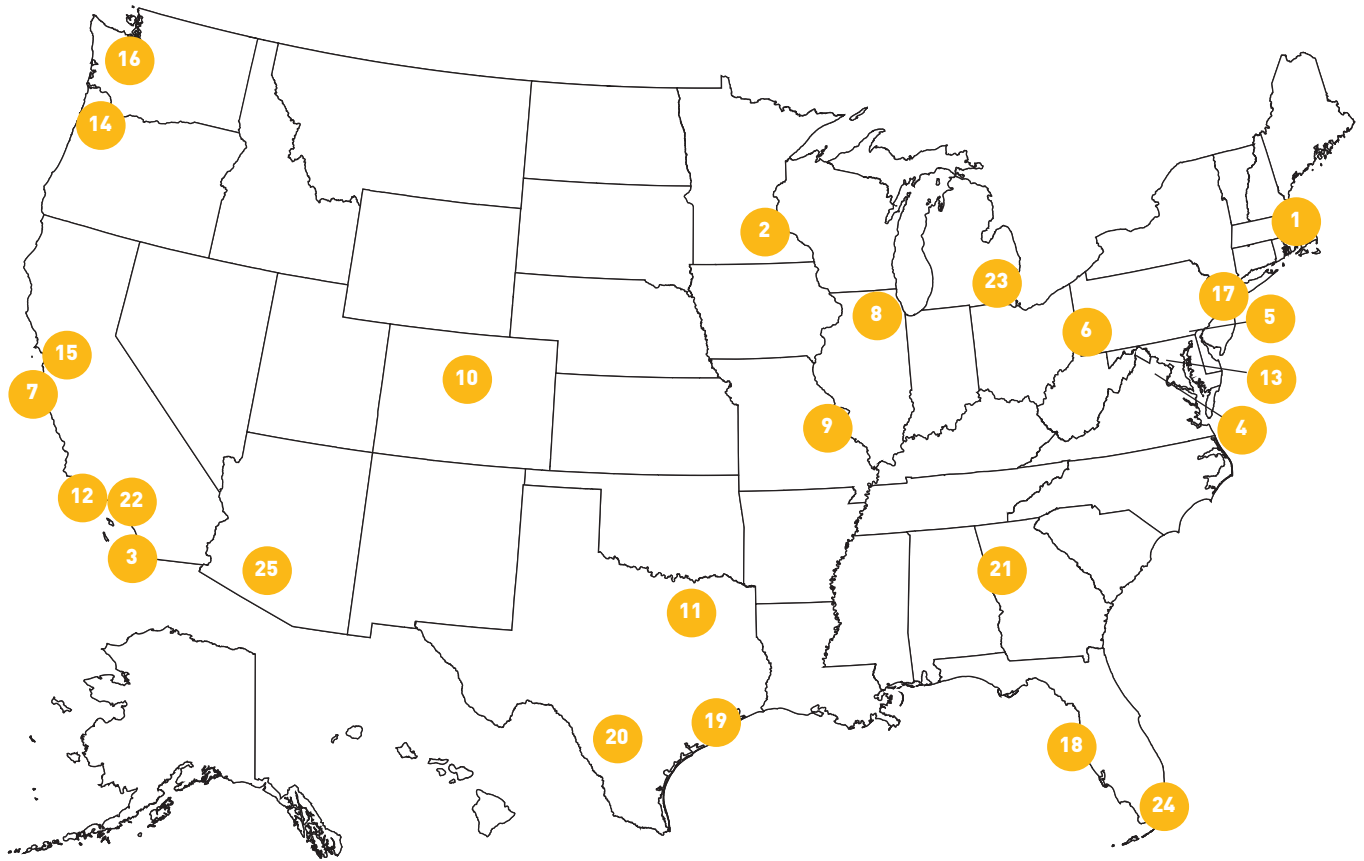
In short, the situation of youth in Boston is a mirror of adults' employment and education status. Neighborhoods in which adults have solid educational credentials and high employment rates also tend to be home to young people with higher rates of school and work attachment. An in-depth exploration of youth disconnection in each of these twenty-five metro areas can be found in the **METRO AREA SNAPSHOTS**.

TABLE 3 Characteristics of Three Boston Communities with the Highest Rate of Disconnection

	DISCONNECTED YOUTH [%]	ADULT UNEMPLOYMENT [%]	POVERTY [%]	BACHELOR'S DEGREE OR HIGHER [%]	AFRICAN AMERICAN [%]	ASIAN AMERICAN [%]	LATINO [%]	WHITE [%]
Boston	9.0	8.1	10.3	43.0	6.6	6.4	9.0	74.9
Mission Hill, Roxbury	16.3	12.8	31.7	18.6	60.2	3.4	22.2	9.7
East Boston, Revere, Winthrop (near airport)	17.6	7.0	17.2	19.3	4.9	4.0	33.0	55.3
City of Brockton	18.4	8.8	12.8	18.8	28.4	2.2	8.5	54.8

Source: Measure of America analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2010 and 2006–2010.

Metro Area Snapshots



1

Boston has the lowest share of youth who are disconnected, a rate of 9 percent, among the twenty-five most populous metro areas. The key to Boston's top position is education. With more than fifty institutions of higher education, Boston is home to transplanted students from across the country and around the world. But Boston does not just excel in access to higher education. The metro area has very low high school dropout rates and some of the highest preschool enrollment rates of this group of twenty-five metro areas. Adults in Boston today have high rates of educational attainment: nine in ten have at least a high school diploma (the fourth highest rate among major metro areas); 43 percent have bachelor's degrees; and 19 percent have graduate degrees. The correlation between the poverty rate and youth disconnection rate is strong, this study shows. Boston has the second-lowest poverty rate, 10.3 percent, and the second-lowest child poverty rate, 11.9 percent. The Boston metro area also has one of the lowest percentage of teenagers 16 to 19 who are mothers.

However, Boston has a high rate of Latino youth disconnection; only two metro areas perform worse. While Boston has a relatively low percentage of African American disconnected youth compared to other metro areas, African American youth are still twice as likely to be disconnected as white youth, while Latino youth are three times as likely to be disconnected as white youth.

2

The **Minneapolis-St. Paul** metro area ranks second, with a youth disconnection rate of 9.3 percent. Educational attainment among adults, which correlates strongly with greater connection among young people, is high. Ninety-three percent of Minneapolis-St. Paul adults over age 25 have at least a high school diploma—the highest percentage among the cities in this study. The dropout rate, 13.1 percent, is the country's second lowest.

Minneapolis–St. Paul has the third-lowest poverty rate, tied with San Francisco, 10.9 percent, and it also has the fourth-lowest unemployment rate, 8.8 percent. This metro area also has the highest labor force participation of 16- to 24 year-olds in the top twenty-five metro areas. But extremely large racial gaps exist in the Twin Cities. African American youth have the highest disconnection rate, 22.5 percent. African Americans are more than three times as likely to be disconnected as whites are—the second-largest disparity of the metro areas in this study after Pittsburgh.

3

San Diego ranks third; 11.1 percent of youth ages 16–24—approximately 50,000 teens and young adults—are disconnected. San Diego has the fourth-lowest dropout rate among the metro areas in this study as well as the third-lowest unemployment rate for youth ages 16–24, 16.9 percent. Adults in San Diego have educational attainment levels above the national average. Differences by neighborhood, however, are striking. In the southwestern communities of San Diego County, including Imperial Beach, almost one in five (18.9 percent) are disconnected. In the affluent coastal communities between Torrey Pines and Mission Bay, roughly one in every twenty-eight youth (3.6 percent) are disconnected.

4

Washington, D.C., ranks fourth, with a youth disconnection rate of 11.3. The D.C. metro area has the highest percentage of adults with postsecondary educational credentials; roughly 47 percent hold bachelor's degrees, and 22 percent hold graduate degrees. The city comprises a sizeable population of transplants, luring highly credentialed individuals from around the country with well-paying jobs. Washington, D.C., has the lowest poverty rate among the twenty-five largest metro areas, and the highest median earnings per year, just over \$43,000. D.C. also has the lowest unemployment rate among this group.

The overall picture masks huge gaps by neighborhood, however. In Northwest D.C., fewer than 3 percent of youth are disconnected, whereas in Southeast D.C., an astonishing 33 percent of youth are—an eleven-fold difference.

5

The nearly tied Pennsylvania metro areas of **Philadelphia** and **Pittsburgh** rank fifth and sixth, with a youth disconnection rate of 11.9. Both metro areas perform well overall in terms of educational enrollment and attainment. Pittsburgh has the second-highest enrollment rate for 16 to 24 year-olds, and Philadelphia has the third-highest. Both metro areas are above the national average in terms of preschool enrollment; in Pittsburgh, almost six in ten 3 to 4 year-olds are enrolled in preschool, the third-highest enrollment rate among the twenty-five largest metro areas; in Philadelphia, 56.9 percent are. Nine in ten Pittsburgh adults have at least a high school diploma, the second-highest percentage among the metro areas in this study. It also has the lowest dropout rate, 13 percent. The educational attainment rates of Philadelphia's adults are higher than the national average.

6

In terms of employment, Pittsburgh has the second-lowest unemployment rate of adults 16 and over, after Washington, D.C. Philadelphia has a slightly higher unemployment rate for adults ages 16 and over, 10.6 percent.

In Philadelphia, nearly one in every five Latino and African American youth are disconnected; young people of color are more than twice as likely as white youth to be disconnected. Pittsburgh, too, struggles with racial disparities; despite its strengths in promoting youth connectedness, one in every four African American young people in Pittsburgh are disconnected. Pittsburgh has the largest gap in youth disconnection between African American and white youth of any metro area in this study.

7

San Francisco ranks seventh, with a youth disconnection rate of 12.4 percent. San Francisco is home to a high percentage of well-educated residents, ranking second in terms of adults with at least a bachelor's degree (43.4 percent). San Francisco has the third-highest overall school enrollment, with nearly eight in ten 16- to 24-year-olds enrolled in school. This metro area has the second-highest median earnings, \$40,300 per year. San Francisco has the third-lowest poverty rate, 10.9 percent, and third-lowest child poverty rate, 13.3 percent. Stark differences separate neighborhoods and racial and ethnic groups, however. The youth disconnection rate in East Oakland is almost eight times that of Berkeley. The African American youth disconnection rate is 19.7, the Latino rate is 17.9, the white rate is 7.9, and the Asian American rate is 7.1.

8

Chicago ranks eighth, with a youth disconnection rate of 13.3 percent. The large and diverse Chicago metro area is a study in contrasts. Overall, the educational attainment and enrollment rates in Chicago are somewhat above the national average, and the poverty rates among both children and adults are slightly better than average. However, unemployment rates are higher.

A racial breakdown of Chicago's disconnected youth shows that the Windy City has one of the three lowest rates of Latino youth disconnection, 16.1 percent. Nonetheless, Latino youth are still twice as likely to be disconnected as white youth in Chicago. The African American youth disconnection rate, 24 percent, is triple that of whites. Chicago neighborhoods are also different worlds when it comes to youth disconnection. In the suburban North Shore communities of Highland Park and Lake Forest, only about one in every thirty-four young people are disconnected, a rate of less than 3 percent. In the South Lawndale and Lower West Side neighborhoods, more than one in every three youth is not in school and not working, a rate of nearly 35 percent.

9

St. Louis and Denver, with a nearly tied youth disconnection rate of 13.4 percent, rank ninth and tenth. Both cities are in the top ten in terms of the proportion of adults who have graduated high school; 88.8 percent and 88.9 percent of Denver and St. Louis adults, respectively, have high school degrees. Furthermore, Denver and St. Louis also are among the three cities with the greatest labor force participation of youth in this age group. About 64 percent of 16- to 24-year-olds in both Denver and St. Louis participate in the labor force, which encourages youth connectedness in both these cities.

10

In Denver, the Latino disconnection rate is 19.1 percent, the African American rate is 15.8 percent, and the white rate is 11 percent, a smaller racial gap than that found in many other cities. In contrast, in St. Louis, the African American rate (23.1 percent) is more than twice the white rate (10.6 percent).

11

Dallas, Los Angeles, and Baltimore, nearly tied with a disconnection rate of 14.2 percent, rank eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth. These three cities are quite different from one another. Los Angeles has a population twice the size of Dallas, and Dallas has twice as many residents as Baltimore. Their racial and ethnic compositions also vary significantly. Latinos are a plurality in Los Angeles, at about 44 percent, and whites constitute roughly 32 percent of the population. In Dallas, whites (around 50 percent) and Latinos (nearly 28 percent) are the most populous groups, whereas in Baltimore, the majority of residents are white (60 percent) or African American (roughly 28 percent).

12

13

In terms of education, the relatively small city of Baltimore has higher rates of educational attainment than either Los Angeles or Dallas. While school enrollment in Baltimore and Dallas is about the same (around 77.5 percent), 87.7 percent of

METRO AREA	TOTAL DISCONNECTED YOUTH (%)	AFRICAN AMERICAN	ASIAN AMERICAN	LATINO	WHITE
	DISCONNECTED YOUTH (%)				
Dallas-Ft. Worth	14.2	21.4	...	16.5	10.3
Los Angeles	14.2	21.0	7.6	17.1	10.2
Baltimore	14.2	22.1	...	18.4	9.7

Baltimore residents have their high school diploma, compared to 83.6 percent of Dallas residents and 77.5 percent of Los Angeles residents. In fact, Los Angeles has the lowest percentage of high-school-educated adults over 25 of all the metro areas in this study. Baltimore residents are also more likely to have a bachelor's or graduate degree than the residents of Dallas and Los Angeles. Dallas and Los Angeles also have a much higher percentage of young residents who are neither enrolled in school nor holders of a diploma or a GED; Los Angeles has the highest dropout rate of all the metro areas, at 26 percent, and Dallas is fairly close behind with the third-highest dropout rate, 25.3 percent.

Baltimore also has the lowest poverty rate of these three cities at 11 percent, while Dallas is at 14.6 percent and Los Angeles is at 16.3 percent. The unemployment rate for adults ages 16 and older is highest in Los Angeles at 12.1 percent, but is about 9 percent in both Dallas and Baltimore. Poverty, adult educational attainment, and the unemployment rate all correlate with youth disconnection. The fact that these three geographically distinct and otherwise dissimilar cities have all arrived at a youth disconnection rate of 14.2 percent shows how different combinations of factors can affect the ability of young people to remain engaged in school or to transition to a career.

Significant differences by neighborhood can be found, particularly in large, sprawling Los Angeles. In West Los Angeles, the youth disconnection rate is 3.5; in now predominantly Latino Watts, the rate is 25.1 percent. Despite the differences among the cities, however, the pattern of youth disconnection by race and ethnicity is quite similar.

14

15

Portland and Sacramento rank fourteenth and fifteenth, with a youth disconnection rate of 14.3. In terms of education, about 80 percent of Sacramento's school-aged children and youth are enrolled in school, the fifth-highest enrollment rate of the metro areas in this study, while about 77 percent of Portland children and youth are enrolled. Portland also has a slightly higher percentage of young residents who are not currently enrolled in school and also have not completed high school or a GED. However, nearly 90 percent of Portland's adult residents have received high school diplomas—slightly higher than Sacramento's 87 percent.

Although Sacramento has a somewhat stronger enrollment rate among its young residents, it also has a higher poverty rate, 15.1 percent. Portland's poverty rate, 13.4 percent, is two percentage points below the national rate. The unemployment rate in Sacramento is about 13.8 percent for ages 16 and over, and Portland's unemployment rate is close behind at 12.5 percent.

Sacramento and Portland have very different racial and ethnic demographics. Portland is a majority white city (76.3 percent) and has the smallest population of African American residents of the largest metro areas, 2.7 percent. Portland has one of the highest percentages of disconnected white youth, 13.5 percent. Sacramento, with a substantially smaller white majority (55.7 percent), also has a fairly high percentage of white disconnected youth, 12.3 percent.

16

Seattle's rate of youth disconnection is the same as the national average of 14.7 percent. In terms of education in the metro area today, Seattle boasts a highly educated population, with 37 percent of adults having a bachelor's degree or more. However, without concerted attention, Seattle's positioning as a city with a competitive workforce is in jeopardy: far too many young people in the 16-to-24 age range have left school, with a dropout rate of over 18 percent.

While the overall rate is at the national average, African American disconnection in Seattle is astonishingly high, at 26.9 percent. More than one in four African Americans in Seattle are unmoored from school and work.

17

While the **New York** metro area's overall ranking is near the middle of this pack of twenty-five, closer examination of the city with the greatest total number of disconnected youth—almost 350,000—shows tremendous variation within the metro area by geography and by race.

Disconnection by Neighborhood. The New York metro area has the widest gap by neighborhood in terms of youth disconnection of America's largest cities. In the communities of Hicksville, Bethpage, and Plainview in Nassau County on Long Island, the rate of young adults not in school and not working is one tenth the rate of the South Bronx neighborhoods of Mott Haven, Melrose, and Hunts Point in New York City. These disparities map closely with disparities in the other associated factors described in this brief: poverty, adult unemployment, and adult education levels.

Disconnection by New York City Borough. The New York metro area encompasses a wider span than the five boroughs of New York City. It is nonetheless instructive to explore disconnection among youth in these boroughs. Rates range from the Bronx (22.3 percent) to Manhattan (12.3 percent).

Disconnection by Race and Ethnicity. As is the case in the country as a whole, youth disconnection is highest for African Americans, followed by Latinos, Asians, and whites. However, two things stand out in New York. First is that while the rates for African Americans and whites in New York are below the national average for those groups, for Latinos and Asian Americans, rates are well above the average for those groups. Nearly 10 percent of New York's Asian American youth are disconnected, considerably higher than the 8 percent U.S. average and the highest rate of the metro areas for which reliable data on disconnection for Asian Americans are available. Similarly, the Latino rate is well above the 18.5 percent average and second highest after Phoenix. These are areas for particular concern and action.

DISCONNECTED YOUTH (%)

NYC Metro Area	15.2
Manhattan	12.3
Queens	13.3
Staten Island	14.0
Brooklyn	18.0
Bronx	22.3

18

While both **Houston** (19) and **Tampa-St. Petersburg** (18) have similar rates of youth disconnection, 15.7 percent, there is important variation in associated factors facing teenagers and young adults. In Houston, a major challenge is education—both that of the adults in the community and for high-school-aged students. Houston ranks fairly low among major metro areas in terms of adults who have completed high school. While in cities like Pittsburgh, Seattle, and Boston, over 90 percent have, in Houston, only 81 percent of adults 25 and older have completed high school, the third-lowest rate after Los Angeles and Riverside-San Bernardino. Because, as is discussed above, in places where adults have high levels of education, fewer youth are disconnected, it is not surprising that Houston struggles with a dropout rate of one in four young people who have not completed high school or a GED. Finally, while the overall rate of youth disconnection among Asian Americans nationally is the lowest of any racial or ethnic group, at 8 percent, Houston has the second-highest percentage of Asian American disconnected youth of the six metro areas in this study for which reliable data on this population are available, 8.5 percent.

Tampa-St. Petersburg has a somewhat stronger educational foundation than Houston in terms of young people completing high school. An area of particular challenge for this Florida metro area is very low median earnings (at just over \$27,000 annually) and very high adult unemployment rates, 13.2 percent. In Tampa-St. Petersburg, Latino youth are disproportionately likely to be disconnected (nearly one in five are), yet this metro area also has one of the highest percentages of white disconnected youth at 13.3 percent, the fourth-highest rating in the twenty-five largest metro areas after Riverside-San Bernardino, Portland, and Detroit.

19

20

San Antonio has the highest rate of youth disconnection of the three largest Texas metro areas, 15.9 percent. Latinos make up more than half of the population here. In San Antonio, several indicators that have a bearing on youth disconnection stand out: the first is that median earnings are exceedingly low—the typical worker in San Antonio can expect to earn under \$27,000 annually from wages and salaries, the lowest earnings of the twenty-five largest metro areas and \$4,000 less than in both Dallas-Ft. Worth and Houston. A second factor of concern is related to the choices and opportunities of teenage girls. San Antonio has the highest rate of teen motherhood among the country's largest metro areas, a rate nearly double the national average.

21

Atlanta (21) and **Riverside–San Bernardino** (22) both have youth disconnection rates just under 17 percent. Riverside–San Bernardino, one of the fastest-growing areas of California, has a very young population—nearly 30 percent of its residents are under 18. Thus, tackling youth disconnection takes on particular urgency. On a set of indicators that are critical for this issue—child poverty, preschool enrollment, high school completion—Riverside–San Bernardino has fallen behind. Nearly one in four children under 18 live in poverty, and one in four teens and young adults dropped out of high school. Riverside–San Bernardino also has the largest percentage of white disconnected youth of all the metro areas: 14.5 percent of white teenagers and young adults are detached from both work and school.

While Atlanta’s rate of youth disconnection is nearly identical to Riverside–San Bernardino’s, some of the challenges it faces are different. In Atlanta, the adult education level is high—34 percent of adults today have at least a bachelor’s degree, as compared with 28 percent for the United States and a far lower 20 percent in Riverside–San Bernardino. Yet the schools are not retaining young people. More than one in four young people ages 16 to 24 have dropped out, the fourth-highest rate after Los Angeles, Miami, and Dallas–Ft. Worth. Finally, urban minority youth face the greatest obstacles to connection; Atlanta’s African American youth are more likely to be disconnected than young people of any other race, and Latino rates are also above the national average as well as that of Riverside–San Bernardino.

23

Detroit was hit hard by the Great Recession. The city has the highest youth unemployment rate (30 percent) and adult unemployment rate (17 percent) of any of the twenty-five largest metro areas. Further analysis by neighborhood reveals that the areas of Conant Gardens, Grixdale, and Krainz Woods have adult unemployment rates of nearly one in four (24 percent), and youth disconnection in these areas is nearly twice that of Detroit overall (33 percent).

The data show that education is far less an obstacle in Detroit than diminished opportunities to enter the workforce. Detroit ranks fairly close to the national average in terms of both high school completion and higher education, yet its ranking in terms of disconnection is among the five worst. Consistent with the analysis of the research brief on the challenges facing particular groups, African Americans, who make up nearly 23 percent of Detroit’s population, often face additional obstacles in the job market. Detroit’s African American youth have disconnection rates of 25.3 percent, as compared with 13.5 percent of whites and 19.2 percent of Latinos.

24

The city of **Miami** and its surrounding suburbs have over 110,000 disconnected youth—nearly one of every six teens and young adults. This high rate of youth disconnection tracks closely with a very high poverty rate in Miami, among the highest among the twenty-five largest metro areas, and the second-highest dropout rate, just after Los Angeles.

Elevated high school dropout rates for 16- to 24-year-olds are coupled with one of the highest youth unemployment rates, more than one in four, leaving few options for a fulfilling and productive young adulthood for far too many young people in Miami. Miami’s violent crime rate is among the highest in America’s largest metro areas.

25

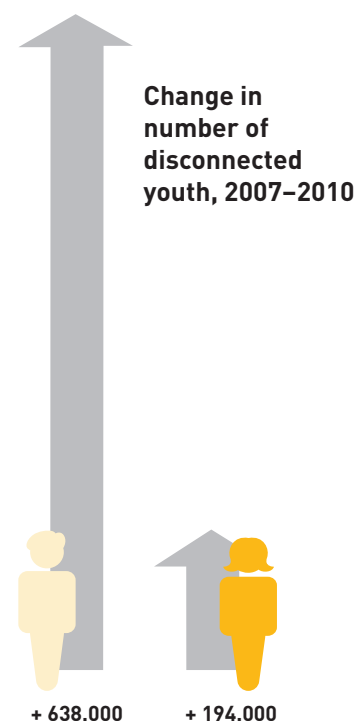
Phoenix ranks last of the nation’s twenty-five largest metro areas, with nearly one of every five teens and young adults neither working nor in school. However, within Phoenix, not every group is struggling with youth disconnection. White teens and young adults have a rate of disconnection that is somewhat higher than the national average for whites (13.3 percent) but below that of several other large metro areas. The African American rate in Phoenix is twice that of whites (28.2 percent), and nearly 24 percent of Latino youth are disconnected. Latino youth disconnection is a particular challenge, as Latinos make up almost 30 percent of the total population.

Further analysis shows that youth employment is not the area of greatest challenge; unemployment in Phoenix for youth ages 16 to 24 is virtually equal to the national unemployment rate for that age group. Instead, two other areas stand out. Only 55 percent of young people in this age group are enrolled in school, the lowest of any of the twenty-five metro areas, and the rate of teen motherhood is twice that of Boston.

DISCONNECTED YOUTH: GENDER

In 2007, young women were slightly more likely to be disconnected than young men, which follows a historical trend in which young women have been much more likely than young men to be out of both school and work. But by the end of the Great Recession, the balance had shifted. The ranks of the disconnected grew by 638,000 men, as compared to 194,000 women, over this period. Young men today outnumber young women among the disconnected: 53 percent of young people not in school and not working are men; 47 percent are women.

This shift is helping to close a long-standing gender imbalance in rates of youth disconnection observed by a number of researchers. A recent Congressional Research Service report, which employed a more restricted definition of disconnection than the one used here, found that the rate of disconnection among young women nationwide exceeded that of young men every year from 1988 to 2008. The difference varied from as little as about 20 percent in the mid-2000s to as much as 140 percent in 1990.⁶ Levitan reported a similar historical gender imbalance in youth



BOX 1 Who Is Considered a “Disconnected Youth”?

Disconnected youth are people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither in school nor working. One of the challenges of studying this population is that several different official data sources exist, each of which differs slightly in what data they make available and for what segments of the population. The result is that researchers working with different datasets, and often with different definitions of what constitutes disconnection, come up with different numbers for this indicator. Measure of America has chosen to use the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS) for this research, chiefly because the ACS is reliable and updated annually, and because the survey includes young people who are in institutional group quarters such as juvenile or adult correctional facilities and supervised medical facilities.

Are part-time students considered disconnected youth? No. All youth ages 16 to 24 who are in school, whether full- or part-time, are considered connected.

Are part-time workers considered disconnected youth? No. All full- and part-time workers ages 16 to 24 are considered connected.

Are youth who are out of a job, but looking for work, counted as disconnected youth? Yes. In this study, youth who are looking for work are considered disconnected. Some studies exclude from the disconnected category young people who are actively looking for work.

How many disconnected youth live in institutions? Of the 5.8 million disconnected youth in 2010, about

four hundred thousand live in residential institutions, including juvenile or adult correctional facilities and residential medical facilities, such as psychiatric units or long-term-care hospitals.

Is a young person enrolled in a course of study while in a residential correctional or medical facility considered disconnected? No. In 2010 about 25 percent of institutionalized young people were enrolled in educational programs. These young people are considered connected.

Are young people in the military considered disconnected? No. In this study, young people who are members of the armed forces are considered connected.

disconnection up to the early 2000s.⁷ The gender flip that we see between 2007 and 2010 is thus part of a longer-term trend of greater attachment to work and school among young women, particularly young women of color, as compared to their male counterparts.

Disconnected young women are significantly more likely to be mothers than connected young women, 35 percent as compared to 10 percent. Within this group of disconnected young mothers, nearly one in eight are still in their teens. The obvious conclusion is that becoming a mother makes young women less likely to continue their schooling or to start or continue working. Counterintuitively, however, research now suggests that the causality typically works in the opposite direction: with few appealing options and no education or career trajectory to disrupt, disconnected young women see few advantages in postponing motherhood.⁸

DISCONNECTED YOUTH: RACE AND ETHNICITY

Clearly the overall health of the economy and the job market matters for youth connection; the ranks of the disconnected swelled significantly during the Great Recession. However, the proportion of those who are disconnected within each racial and ethnic group varies widely and changed very little from 2007 to 2010. African American and Latino youth are disproportionately represented among the ranks of disconnected youth; white and Asian American youth are underrepresented (see **FIGURE 1 on page 16**).

- **African American** young people are the most likely to be disconnected, as the more than one in five African American youth holding this status today indicate. Even in metropolitan areas with comparatively few young people not working or in school overall, African American disconnection rates remain stubbornly high. Employment is a particular challenge; **BOX 2** explores this issue. The largest gender gap in youth disconnection is also found among African Americans; an astonishing 26 percent of African American teenage boys and young men are disconnected from school and work, compared to 19 percent of teenage girls and young women.
- **Latino** youth also have a high rate of disconnection: 18.5 percent. As with the African American rate, the Latino disconnection rate remains high even when prevailing rates within metro areas are comparatively low. Latinos are the only group in which young women outnumber young men among the disconnected. Out-

Least Disconnection for African Americans

1. San Diego
2. Boston
3. Denver

Most Disconnection for African Americans

21. Pittsburgh
22. Seattle
23. Phoenix

Least Disconnection for Latinos

1. Washington, DC
2. San Diego
3. Chicago

Most Disconnection for Latinos

20. Boston
21. New York
22. Phoenix

of-school Latino young men are much more likely to be in the workforce than their female counterparts. Young Latino women have the highest female disconnection rate among the country's major ethnic and racial groups.

BOX 2 African American and Latino Youth Face Different Challenges

A closer look at the two racial and ethnic groups with the highest rates of disconnection, African Americans and Latinos, reveals that teens and young adults in each group face a somewhat different challenge.

Average African American school enrollment for this population, 59 percent, is just shy of the U.S. average. However, African American youth ages 16 to 24 who aren't in school struggle to find a place in the job market. This situation holds especially for out-of-school African American men; the proportion of African American males in that age range who are employed to the total population in that age range (called the *employment-to-population ratio*) is nearly 22 percentage points lower than that for all young men.

On the other hand, Latinos have far lower school enrollment rates (53 percent) than African Americans, but those who are not in school are far more likely to be working than their African American counterparts, with employment rates in this group just under the national average. A sizeable gap in employment separates young Latino women and men, however. Of those not enrolled in school, employment for Latino men is almost 15 percentage points higher than that for Latino women. Young Latino women are, however, considerably more likely than their male counterparts to be enrolled in school, reflecting a national trend (see TABLE 4).

TABLE 4 African Americans and Latinos Face Different Challenges

	EMPLOYMENT-TO-POPULATION RATIO [% all youth 16–24]	EMPLOYMENT-TO-POPULATION RATIO [% youth ages 16–24 not in school]	SCHOOL ENROLLMENT [% ages 16–24]
U.S. Total	45.7	61.9	61.4
All Females	46.6	60.3	64.4
All Males	45.0	63.2	58.6
African Americans	33.8	45.0	59.0
African American Females	37.3	49.5	62.3
African American Males	30.3	41.3	55.8
Latinos	44.5	60.7	53.0
Latino Females	40.9	52.3	57.4
Latino Males	47.8	66.9	49.2

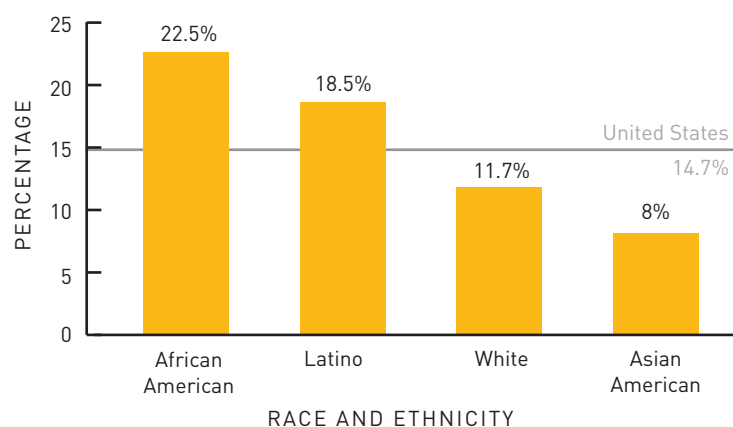
Source: Measure of America analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2010 PUMS Microdata File.

Significant variation can be seen in rates of youth disconnection by race and ethnicity within each of the twenty-five largest metro areas. For **African Americans**, San Diego, Boston, and Denver have relatively low rates of disconnection. On the other hand, in Pittsburgh, Seattle, and Phoenix, young African Americans have more than a one in four chance of being disconnected.

For **Latinos**, Washington, DC, has the lowest rate of youth disconnection, followed by San Diego and Chicago. At the other end, rates in Boston, New York, and Phoenix are very high. While Boston has the lowest proportion of teens and young adults adrift overall, at 9 percent, Boston's Latino youth are more than twice as likely to be disconnected, at 20.2 percent, placing Boston near the bottom of the ranking. (Rankings are not always out of twenty-five because some metro areas do not have a sufficiently large population of a race or ethnicity to enable reliable calculations.)

- Among **whites**, 11.7 percent of teenagers and young adults are not connected to work or school, a rate that is lower than the national average by 3 percentage points, yet more than one in every ten white young people is still a significant number. Whites make up 56.7 percent of young people in this age group nationally, but only 45.2 percent of those who are disconnected. White male youth are slightly more likely to be disconnected than their female counterparts—12.3 percent as compared to 11.1 percent.
- **Asian American** young people are the least likely to be disconnected; only 8 percent of Asian Americans are, and this number changed little from 2007. Asian American young women and men differ little in terms of disconnection; the rate differential between them is not statistically significant.

FIGURE 1 Disconnected Youth by Race and Ethnicity



Source: Measure of America analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2010 PUMS Microdata.

2010 Disconnected Youth by Race, Ethnicity, and Gender (%)

Asian Americans 8.0

Asian American females 8.1

Asian American males 7.9

Whites 11.7

White females 11.1

White males 12.3

U.S. Average 14.7

All U.S. females 14.1

All U.S. males 15.2

Latinos 18.5

Latino females 20.3

Latino males 16.8

African Americans 22.5

African American females 19.0

African American males 26.0

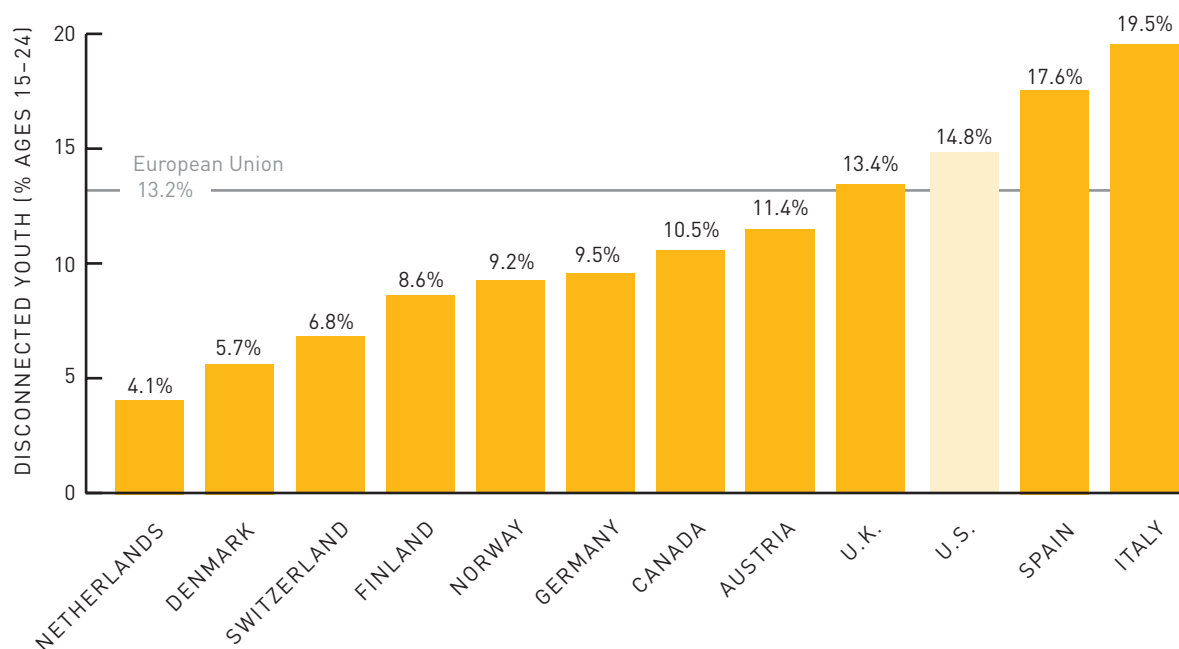
DISCONNECTED YOUTH: INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

The problem of youth disconnection is not confined to the United States; other affluent democracies are also grappling with this critical issue and share many similar challenges in youth employment related to structural changes in the labor market and the effects of the global recession. The U.S. rate of youth disconnection is higher than the average for the countries of the European Union (see **FIGURE 2**).⁹ A significant range exists among those countries, however. Rates in the Netherlands (4.1 percent), Denmark (5.7 percent), Norway (9.2 percent), and Germany

(9.5 percent) are well below those of the United States, whereas Spain and Italy have rates well above the United States. The United States has a younger population than any of these European and Scandinavian countries, underscoring the magnitude of its challenge.

Rates of disconnection in the United States were stable through the mid-2000s at around 13 percent. But the total number of disconnected youth grew by more than 800,000 from 2007 to 2010, pushing their share of the total youth population up nearly 2 percentage points, from 12.9 percent in 2007. The Great Recession had a similar effect in other affluent countries. The erosion of low-skilled jobs that provide middle-class wages is a fact of life in Europe as well as in America, driven by technological change and automation and by outsourcing to cheaper labor markets. And young people were more severely affected by the global economic downturn than were adults. New labor-market entrants still face greater barriers than experienced workers, leading to concerns in Europe of a “lost generation.”¹⁰ But as the numbers in **FIGURE 2** show, countries have responded to these structural shifts in different ways, yielding very different outcomes. Further discussion of successful policies in some of these countries is found later in this report.

FIGURE 2 Youth Disconnection in the United States and Other Affluent Democracies, 2011



Source: OECD Project on Jobs for Youth, www.oecd.org/employment/youth.

Note: Values presented in this table are the most current internationally comparable disconnected youth rates available. The U.S. value differs slightly from that presented elsewhere in this report due to different reference years and minor definitional differences between datasets.

Youth Disconnection: Why Does It Matter and Who Is at Risk?

THE LIFELONG CONSEQUENCES OF YOUTH DISCONNECTION

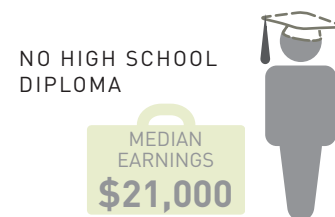
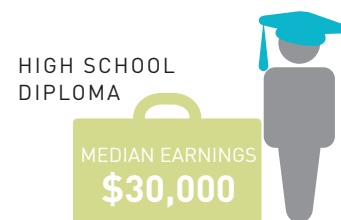
For many young people, the years that stretch from the mid-teens to the mid-twenties are alive with possibilities; it is a period of experimenting with and ultimately solidifying one's identity, gaining work experience and educational credentials, building capacities for independent decision-making, and developing the social as well as emotional skills that enable productive and rewarding relationships with colleagues, friends, and romantic partners.

Looking more closely at the first prong of connection, **education**, the links between schooling and a better job and bigger paycheck are well known. In 2010, for example, the median earnings of young adults (ages 25–34) with a bachelor's degree were \$45,000, compared to \$30,000 for those with just a high school diploma, and \$21,000 for those who did not graduate high school.¹¹ Less widely discussed are the links between education and a host of other benefits: higher civic and political participation, greater ability to adjust to change, stronger and more extensive social bonds, more stable relationships, and longer lives. Education is a better predictor of health than either income or health insurance coverage; better educated people tend to practice healthier behaviors, are more likely to adhere to treatment regimens, and are more effective in supporting healthy outcomes for their children.

The second prong of connection, **employment**, also has wide-ranging positive effects. Research shows that participation in the labor force is, of course, essential for earnings, but is also important for reasons that go well beyond earning a salary and receiving benefits; employment matters for social inclusion, self-reliance, and a sense of purpose, and has tangible advantages for physical and psychological health.¹²

When young people miss out on these opportunities, they suffer short- and long-term harm. The blows to one's self-confidence and sense of self-efficacy at this critical juncture are painful and damaging, as is the social isolation that often accompanies youth disconnection. In addition, disconnection in late adolescence and early adulthood has deleterious effects—some researchers call it “scarring”—across the life course.¹³ Failure to find work is distressing for anyone, but unemployment in youth increases the risks of unemployment in later life, both by limiting the ability of young adults to accumulate work experience and skills and by signaling to potential future employers a

Median earnings of young adults depend on educational attainment (ages 25–34)



lack of productivity. These scarring effects can manifest themselves in other areas as well. Possible romantic partners can interpret unemployment and lack of educational credentials as a sign of limited earning potential or evidence of poor motivation, affecting one's personal life. Researchers have also found that disconnection has scarring effects on health, happiness, and job satisfaction—effects that endure years later.¹⁴

Why do limited opportunities, missed chances, and wrong turns in adolescence and early adulthood—a period increasingly understood as a new life stage called “emerging adulthood”—exert such a powerful effect on later life? The combination of new legal and social independence, adult rights and consequences, and still-undeveloped cognitive abilities make emerging adulthood a time rich in potential for joy and peril. Emerging adults have adult bodies and, by age 18, most adult rights (such as the rights to work, drive, vote, consent to sex, enter into contracts, and join the military); they also face adult consequences for their actions (parenthood, adult criminal sentencing). Yet brain research has now proven what a day spent among teenagers would suggest—namely that the part of the brain that makes decisions, weighs risk, assesses likely consequences, predicts the effects of actions on others, controls impulses, and plans for the future (the prefrontal cortex) doesn't fully develop until the mid-twenties.¹⁵ Evidence also suggests that people in this age group feel emotions with greater intensity than adults do. In sum, these years, “a stage of evolving social roles and identities,”¹⁶ tend to set a person's long-term social and professional trajectory and cement important relationships. When this stage of life helps move young adults toward self-sufficiency and the attainment of valuable skills and experiences, society reaps dividends for years to come. When young adults fail to gain a foothold in mainstream school or work life in these years, society pays a heavy price.

Researchers have found that disconnection has scarring effects on health, happiness, and job satisfaction—effects that endure years later.

WHICH FACTORS ARE MOST CLOSELY ASSOCIATED WITH YOUTH DISCONNECTION?

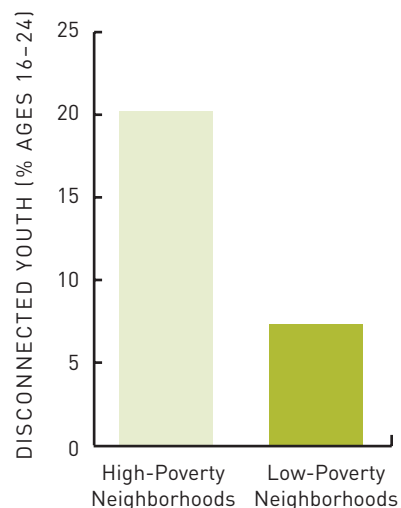
As described earlier, several Boston neighborhoods with very high levels of youth disconnection are also places with comparatively lower rates of educational attainment and employment, a pattern that tends to be repeated across the twenty-five metro areas under study. High rates of youth disconnection in the country's twenty-five most populous metropolitan areas are strongly associated with three critical factors: poverty, adult unemployment, and low levels of adult educational attainment. The analysis looks at all the Census-designated

neighborhood clusters that make up the twenty-five largest metro areas. As discussed above, these clusters of neighborhoods are all approximately equal in size, enabling apples-to-apples comparisons.

Poverty. Disconnected youth are, not surprisingly, considerably more likely to come from disconnected communities—areas in which high rates of poverty are evidence of and contributors to isolation from mainstream social and economic systems. A startling 39 percent of disconnected youth live in households with incomes that fall below the poverty line, compared with an already-high 21 percent of connected youth. In terms of community conditions, one in five young people in high-poverty metro neighborhoods are disconnected, as compared with only about one in fourteen for youth in low-poverty neighborhoods (see **SIDEBAR**). Low-poverty neighborhoods are those with a poverty rate below 5 percent. High-poverty neighborhoods have a poverty rate of above 20.9 percent.

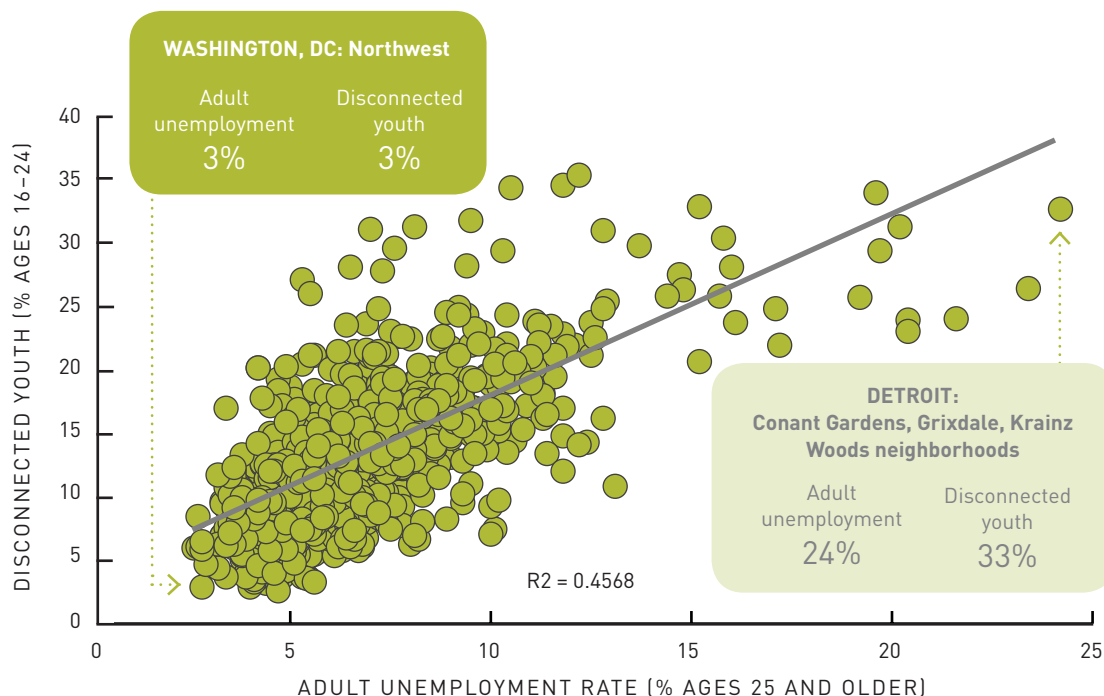
Adult Unemployment. In towns and communities with high levels of adult unemployment, young people tend to be disconnected from work and school as well (see **FIGURE 3**). Each dot below represents one

Disconnected Youth Are Three Times as Likely to Come from Poor Neighborhoods



Source: Measure of America analysis of U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey PUMS Microdata 2006–2010. Note: Thresholds set at one standard deviation above and below the mean for all neighborhoods.

FIGURE 3 Communities with Low Adult Unemployment Tend to Have Fewer Disconnected Youth



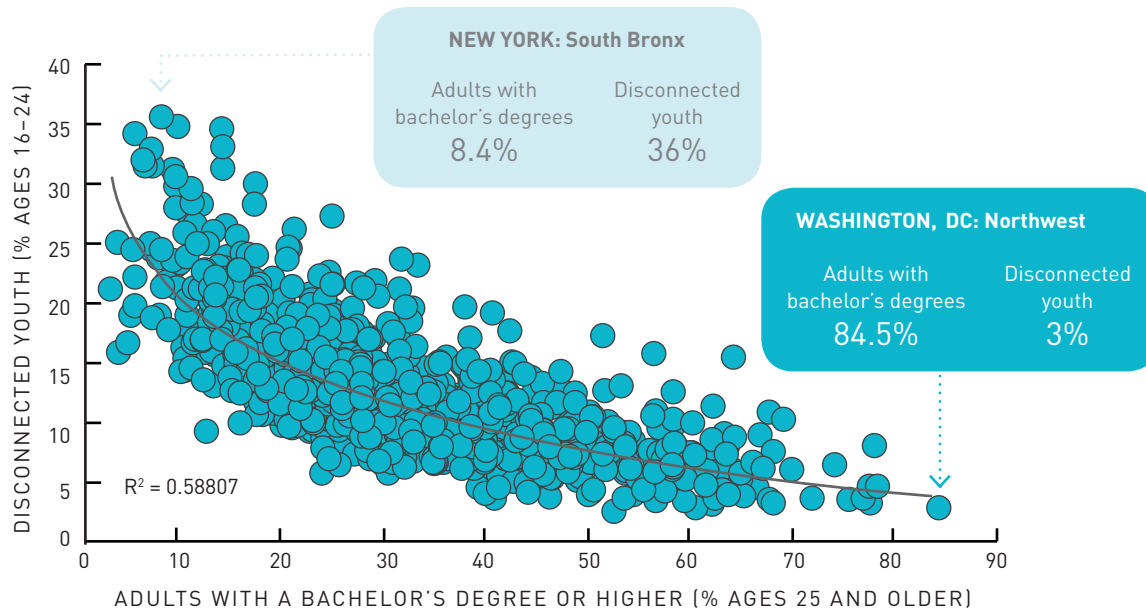
Source: Measure of America analysis of U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey PUMS Microdata 2006–2010.

neighborhood cluster (PUMA).

Adult Educational Attainment. Another strong link exists between connectedness of young people to work or school and the educational status of adults in their communities. Towns and neighborhoods in which fewer adults have at least a four-year college degree have a far greater proportion of disconnected young people (see **FIGURE 4**). In fact, the positive benefits for the community seem to accelerate in impact, as is shown by the logarithmic regression line, as the proportion of adults with bachelor's degrees in an area increases.

Why is the benefit of college-educated adults in a community so important for youth connection? Adults with college degrees are better able to contribute to their own children's academic and labor market success. In addition, the accelerating bonus demonstrated in the graph shows that their presence in a community also contributes to the range of opportunities open to young people outside their immediate families. For instance, college-educated adults have higher rates of volunteerism, which could contribute to community opportunity through mentoring programs or other forms of civic engagement. Finally, because those with a college degree earn more, they tend to spend more in stores,

FIGURE 4 As the Proportion of Adults with a Bachelor's Degree Increases, Disconnection among Youth Declines Rapidly



Source: Measure of America analysis of U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey PUMS Microdata 2006–2010.

restaurants, and other businesses and thus support entry-level jobs in the local community.

HOW DOES POVERTY FUEL YOUTH DISCONNECTION?

The data at the community level tell a clear story: educational, employment, and economic advantages in families and communities combine to create a winning recipe for educational and employment connection among young people; isolation, marginalization, low levels of education and workforce attachment, and lack of material means—which together can be understood as human poverty—are telltale signs of disconnection. What accounts for this concentration of advantage and disadvantage in different communities, and how does it contribute to youth disconnection?

In his seminal book, *When Work Disappears*,¹⁷ William Julius Wilson identified several economic and policy trends since 1970 that disproportionately harmed low-income communities of color in central cities.

- First is the **drop in demand for unskilled labor**—which resulted from a variety of critical shifts in the labor market, most notably the spread of new technologies that displaced less skilled workers, global outsourcing of manufacturing jobs, and new trade policies that allowed comparatively inexpensive imported goods into the U.S. market. The decline in domestic manufacturing has left few places in the labor market for men without at least a high school degree. Because, for generations, discrimination kept African Americans from educational and career opportunities, and because the educational attainment of individuals is closely tied to their parents' educational attainment, African Americans are still disproportionately represented among unskilled workers.
- Second is the **migration of jobs from central cities**, where low-income communities of color are more likely to be found, to the suburbs. Public transportation rarely links poor, urban neighborhoods to suburban office parks, and many low-income African Americans living in central cities can't afford a car. The result is less access to jobs.
- Third is another **migration to the suburbs**—that of more affluent African American families. In the past, racial segregation meant that minority neighborhoods were home to a mix of

professionals, working-class families, and the very poor. People of color living in high-poverty neighborhoods have less contact today with people of other classes who might help connect them to opportunities, and they also have less exposure to norms and behaviors that the workplace values.

In addition to these shifts, additional factors have added still-greater distance to the gap separating affluent, largely white communities and families from low-income communities and families of color: growing inequality, the Great Recession, and rising incarceration rates.

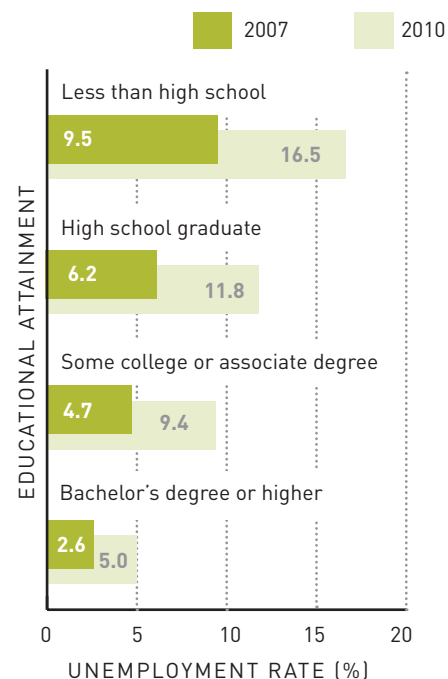
Inequality. In 1970, families with children at the 90th percentile of the income distribution had incomes 4.8 times higher than those at the 10th percentile; since then, the ratio has increased by more than 100 percent, with families at the 90th percentile now earning 10.6 times more than families at the 10th percentile.¹⁸

The Great Recession. The recession rained yet another blow on low-income Americans. For instance, while median earnings dropped for all workers over the 2007–2010 period (by 5.3 percent), those who never completed high school saw a loss of earnings more than three times what those with a graduate or professional degree saw—9.8 percent vs. 2.8 percent.¹⁹ The unemployment rate for those without a high school diploma went from 9.5 percent in prerecession 2007 to 16.5 percent in 2010, and the unemployment rate for those with just a high school degree nearly doubled, from 6.2 percent to 11.8 percent.²⁰

The result of these changes is a playing field for young people that is anything but level. As the above analysis demonstrates, in the largest U.S. cities, families and communities with high levels of education and employment are well placed to help young people navigate the sometimes rocky shoals separating childhood and adulthood. Parents and neighbors have the networks to connect teens and young adults to internships and first jobs, and the educational and labor market experience to provide well-informed guidance. Families are more likely to have the financial resources to support schooling through college and often beyond.

In these communities, schools are well-funded and -staffed, and parents tend to be quite active in shaping the range of choices open to their children, including exerting considerable control over their environments and laying plans to keep children productively occupied after school and during the summer. In Measure of America's work

The Least-Educated Were Hardest Hit by the Great Recession



Source: Measure of America analysis of U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 2007, 2010; Table B23006.

on the Opportunity Index, a measure of opportunity at the county and state levels, one very important finding is that states with high overall opportunity also have high levels of civic participation—families volunteering and mentoring; greater involvement in social, civic, or religious groups; and other activities that build community trust and solidarity.²¹ Absent a family crisis, a serious physical or mental illness, or a drug or alcohol dependency, disconnection from the worlds of school and work is an unlikely outcome for children of affluence.

Families and communities with more limited means, particularly those with low levels of educational attainment and where bouts of unemployment are common, are less able to help their adolescents prepare for an increasingly complex and demanding labor market. Their dreams for and dedication to their children may be boundless, but their resources are not. Low-income communities of color suffer from a lack of public investment that leads to poor-quality schools, limited transportation options, and few amenities. Low-income families tend to have social networks limited to others who share their straitened circumstances, and they typically have less knowledge about and fewer resources for higher education. In addition, studies show that children growing up in disadvantaged families tend to assume adult roles earlier by taking on household tasks, caring for younger siblings, contributing economically to the household, or becoming parents at an early age.²² This adultification of adolescents in poor families stands in marked contrast to the protracted period of dependence typical in more affluent ones. Though these adult roles may offer young people in poverty a valued place in their families and communities, such roles may interfere with the development of skills, credentials, and networks that make labor market success more likely. More affluent children are afforded the luxury of time as well as financial, emotional, and social resources as they transition to adulthood; poorer children often are not.

Rising rates of incarceration among African American men. As is clear from page 16, the rate of disconnection among African American young men calls for concerted attention and action. Research shows that even when controlling for factors like parents' education or poverty rates, young African Americans, particularly boys and men, face more barriers to labor-market success than do other young people.

Just as the disappearance of jobs from disproportionately African American neighborhoods in central cities has hurt young men, so has the skyrocketing rate of incarceration among young men of color. A prison record deters employers, but research shows that ex-offenders who are African American are far less likely than ex-offenders who are white to be granted a job interview or be hired.²³ In addition, because

Families and communities with high levels of education and employment are well-placed to help young people navigate the rocky shoals separating childhood and adulthood.

significantly more black than white young men have criminal records, even young African American men *without* criminal records appear to suffer from “guilt-by-association” discrimination. A 2003 University of Chicago study found that employers are more likely to give job interviews to white applicants with criminal records than to equally well-qualified African American applicants without criminal records. Last, rates of out-of-wedlock parenthood, growing among all racial groups, are still highest among African Americans, and some researchers argue that the obligations of noncustodial fathers to pay child support (and the child support orders that result when they do not) create serious disincentives for employment.²⁴

Teasing out the relative effects of race and ethnicity as opposed to neighborhood characteristics like high-poverty communities is difficult. Evidence suggests that race is becoming less important, and income and educational status more important, in shaping patterns of residential segregation.²⁵ While the declining significance of race in determining residential patterns represents welcome and hard-earned progress, the experience of living in a segregated neighborhood characterized by poor-quality schools, limited transportation options, high rates of crime, and few amenities can be harmful regardless of the reasons for it. Because African Americans and Latinos are disproportionately poor and have lower rates of employment and educational degree attainment, the effect of residential segregation by income looks a lot like the effect of residential segregation by race.

The Way Forward: Preventing Disconnection

What is working today, in the United States and in other affluent democracies, to keep at-risk young people connected or to reattach them to the worlds of school and work? Today we are paying for failure; investing in success by preventing disconnection in the first place is cheaper by any measure and easier than reconnecting those who have fallen out of the mainstream. But we cannot look away from the 5.8 million young people currently consigned to society's margins; for their sakes and the nation's, they need another chance. Thus, ***preventing disconnection*** and ***fostering the reconnection of those currently adrift*** are both critical.

Today we are paying for failure. Investing in success by preventing disconnection is cheaper and easier than reconnecting those who have fallen out of the mainstream.

ADDRESS THE UNEQUAL CONDITIONS OF DAILY LIFE

As the geographic analysis above shows, disconnected youth hail disproportionately from disconnected families living in disconnected neighborhoods. The gap in life chances between children in those disconnected families and children in families either in the mainstream or among the affluent is large and growing. The United States does far less than many other countries to level the playing field, with the result that the life chances of U.S. children and young people are uniquely tied to the capabilities of their parents. Indeed, rich and poor children alike in America are more likely to remain in the class of their parents than American children in the past or European children today, the American Dream notwithstanding.

Investments in public goods like schools and parks are generally far lower, the United States has fewer universal public services like health care and child care, and the nation does far less to protect its citizens from the effects of misfortune than do most of its peer countries. Moving beyond the rhetoric around caring about children to actually making sure that all children live in safe, loving environments where their basic needs for good nutrition, exercise, health care, quality education, security, stability, and emotional connection are met is not rocket science, but it requires different policy choices and greater public investment.

SUPPORT ALL CHILDREN SO THAT THEY CAN ENTER SCHOOL ON AN EQUAL FOOTING

While many assume that the effects of early childhood investments have worn off long before the teens, research shows that the roots of high school completion are planted many years earlier. Harm to cognitive, social, and emotional development in the early years of a child's life sets them on a lowered trajectory for achievement and well-being across the life course. Interventions at this stage are highly effective and less expensive than seeking remedies at a later point. Two approaches in particular have consistently proven to pay tremendous dividends.

1. **Support to parents to promote healthy child development.**

At-risk parents—including those who are young, in fragile relationships, lacking education, and living in poverty (many of them disconnected youth themselves)—can learn the parenting skills they need to become the moms and dads that they want to be (and in many cases, that they themselves did not have). The Nurse Family Partnership, for instance, in which young parents receive parenting classes and home visits from specially trained nurses starting during pregnancy, has proven, dramatic effects on child well-being.²⁶

2. **Center-based preschool.** Research shows that a high-quality, center-based preschool leads to higher rates of high school completion and greater job market participation later in life for at-risk kids by teaching persistence, emotional regulation, and other noncognitive skills. High-quality preschool programs provide children with critical social and emotional skills that compound over time, resulting in higher high school graduation rates, less crime, fewer behavioral problems, fewer teen births, greater workforce attachment, and higher wages.²⁷

TAKE ACTION ON DROPOUT WARNING SIGNS

Everyone who drops out of school was once in school. Keeping them there is easier and more cost-effective than luring back those who have slipped from the educational system's grasp. By the eighth grade, the red flags that a child will drop out of high school are already clear: repeating a grade, failing more than one class, and frequent absence from school. Such children require early identification, programs to address problems

Dropout Warning Signs:

- Repeating a grade
- Failing more than one class
- Frequent absence from school

they may be having at home and at school, testing and treatment for learning or behavioral disabilities, and action plans for keeping them on track. They need engaging teachers and a relevant curriculum, one that includes but goes well beyond the basics to provide the critical thinking and people skills that the workplace increasingly requires. Children need reasons to go to school: enjoyable classes, ways to succeed, and a sense that there is a connection between their coursework and their postschool lives. Too many times, this connection is missing; high school curricula and the skills needed for work and life in general are poorly aligned for children not headed for a four-year university education, as discussed below.

CONNECT AT-RISK CHILDREN TO INTENSIVE, WRAPAROUND SERVICES

A subset of the 5.8 million disconnected youth face particularly daunting challenges. Without concerted attention, many of these young people are headed for a life lived at society's margins. Some 400,000 disconnected youth live in institutional quarters such as **juvenile detention centers** and **residential medical facilities**. About 735,000 are **disabled**; the fact that the disabled are more than twice as likely to be disconnected speaks to our collective failure to find a place in our society for many people living with disabilities. More than one in three disconnected young women are **mothers**, speaking to our inability to offer young women with limited educations compelling reasons to postpone the joys and rigors of motherhood. **Runaway and homeless children** are at a heightened risk of disconnection, and **children aging out of foster care** are at greater risk of becoming disconnected than other youth. Recent studies have shown the dismal outcomes many young people face when they transition out of the foster care system: 25 percent are incarcerated within two years, and more than half have no earnings from work four years after leaving the system.²⁸ Still other at-risk kids drop out and can't reconnect because they are grappling with serious issues like abuse at home, depression, or drug addiction. They need help getting themselves together so that they can rejoin the mainstream.

Despite these challenges, their total numbers are not overwhelming, making meeting their needs an attainable goal. At-risk children and young adults require increased collaboration across systems and intensive services to support them to achieve positive long-term outcomes.

Disconnected youth are three times as likely to be disabled as connected youth — **12.9 percent** as compared to **4.2 percent**.

DEVELOPING MEANINGFUL SCHOOL-TO-WORK OPTIONS FOR ALL YOUNG PEOPLE

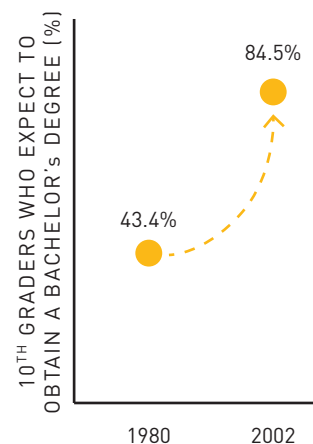
College for all? From 1980 to 2002 the percentage of high school tenth-graders who expected to attain a bachelor's degree jumped from 43.4 percent to 84.5 percent.²⁹ Over those two decades, a new social norm of college as a reasonable expectation for all students and a policy shift toward ubiquitous college preparatory education took hold. Today, the college-for-all view of education dominates public discourse: a four-year bachelor's degree is the end to which everyone should aspire, and this goal is within everyone's reach. For young people who possess the desire and aptitude to succeed in a traditional, four-year college program, but lack the financial resources, guidance, or academic preparation to get them there, this shift is beneficial, particularly when concrete assistance accompanies the rhetoric.³⁰

Undeniably, all young people need some course of study beyond high school to enjoy employment security in today's workplace. But some young people learn in different ways than those favored by academia or have career interests that do not require a bachelor's degree. Many of the "jobs of tomorrow," jobs that allow for economic security and job satisfaction and cannot be outsourced, require some postsecondary education but not necessarily a four-year degree. In fact, an estimated 29 million jobs in the next five years will require workers who have a two-year associate degree or an occupational certificate.³¹ When teachers, guidance counselors, and others who work with young people hold out bachelor's degrees as the only worthwhile goal, young people receive incomplete and misleading information.³² Moreover, many can feel like failures for not being among the college-going one-third and often waste time and money pursuing educational credentials ill suited to their interests and abilities.

The history of vocational, or career and technical, education in the United States is a story of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. The U.S. vocational system reached its peak in the 1970s and early 1980s, with approximately 22 percent of all credits for 1982 seniors in vocational education.³³ From that point on, cost-cutting by the right, a concern from all quarters that the United States had lost its position of global educational primacy, and social justice concerns from the left converged upon vocational education in the mid-1980s.

Studies on educational equity in the 1970s and 1980s generally found that ability-grouping, or tracking, of students negatively impacted the performance of students at the bottom. In addition, tracking changed the way these students viewed education, creating negative attitudes

Tenth-Graders Who Expect to Obtain a Bachelor's Degree



An estimated 29 million jobs in the next five years will require workers who have a two-year associate degree or an occupational certificate.

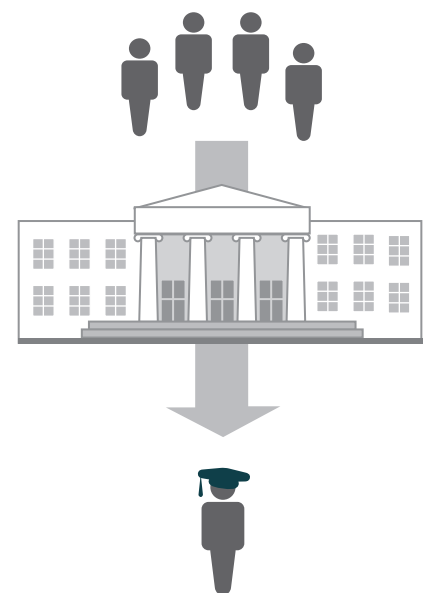
toward learning and reducing educational aspirations. These negative consequences pushed academics to advocate for “detracking” in secondary schools. At the same time, broad educational reforms were taking place with the goal to return the U.S. educational system to an elite position globally. These reforms, which shifted the focus from equity to excellence, followed in the wake of *A Nation at Risk* (1983). The report, commissioned under the Reagan administration, declared that “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.” Vocational education was thus under assault, both as an example of tracking and as an example of mediocrity; the fact that vocational education is expensive (it requires costly equipment and a low teacher-student ratio) in the government-cost-cutting era of the 1980s was an additional blow to its sustainability. The growing belief that all students should reach a certain level of academic achievement created an environment in which purely vocational pursuits were stigmatized.

Today, we find scant trace of the former vocational education option, with little in its place for the population it was meant to serve. Yet career and technical paths that are linked to internships, job placement, life skills classes, and postsecondary certificate or degree programs can provide a mechanism for a successful transition to adulthood for a population that today is either left behind and told that it’s their fault for not being college material, or encouraged to pursue a traditional college sequence that they may not complete. Many such students enroll in community college, but only one in four students who enter community college go on to earn a degree or certificate or transfer to a four-year institution.³⁴ Community colleges have suffered badly from state-level budget cuts and require greater resources to provide the academic and career supports their students typically require.

Fortunately we don’t need to create a new system out of thin air. Much can be learned from peer nations with robust, well-regarded vocational systems—countries that share many of the same educational and labor market challenges. In many European countries, 40 to 70 percent of students undertake a vocational track for secondary education.³⁵ These European vocational systems either feature primarily on-site apprenticeship learning or classroom-based programs. Community colleges in the United States today would have a valuable role to play in such systems. (See **BOX 3** for just three of the many successful models in operation in our peer nations.) Already, many programs that link career and technical education in high school to postsecondary institutions have shown promise in the United States. Two programs that evaluations show have great potential for wide-scale adoption are discussed in **BOX 4**.

Much can be learned from peer nations with robust, well-regarded vocational systems.

Only One in Four Community College Students Earn a Degree or Transfer to a Four-Year College



BOX 3 America's Peers Offer Young People a Wider Range of Pathways to a Productive Adulthood



The **German** system of vocational training attracts more than half of all high school students and offers 350 occupational apprenticeship routes.³⁶ The prevalence of very early, highly formalized tracking makes importing the German system lock, stock, and barrel into the United States unlikely, but Germany offers a very useful model in terms of the system's institutional framework. One quarter of all German companies participate in the apprenticeship system and finance roughly half the expenses. In exchange, they have significant clout in curriculum development. Through this mechanism, the public and private sectors are effectively aligned; enterprise provides real-time input in future job growth but is also held to good labor-market returns to attract public school students. The government supports industry-led innovation with a research center focused solely on vocational education.³⁷ In sum, the German institutional framework engenders an efficient yet flexible system predicated upon both private and public participation; one result is a very low rate of youth disconnection, just 9.5 percent.

Norway offers a solution to persistent youth unemployment, with a hybrid of the school-based and apprenticeship approaches. In Norway, tracking does not begin until age 16. However, upper secondary education (a guaranteed right of all Norwegians) features a vocational system with the first two years in the classroom and the final two years on the job at an apprenticeship. Norway utilizes the resources of industry for both curricular innovation and school-to-work linkages, and the benefits are clear: the unemployment rate for youth ages 15 to 24 in Norway is only 8.7 percent, almost half the European Union average of 21 percent,³⁸ and the youth disconnection rate is just 9.2 percent.



As in Norway, **Finland's** system features an untracked curriculum until age 16.³⁹ In this case, they use a classroom approach. The focus on significant general education for all students aligns "equality of opportunity" with highly promising outcomes: Finnish students consistently rank in the top five of PISA international academic tests.⁴⁰ Furthermore, there is no stigma surrounding vocational education in Finland, with a recent European Commission survey finding that 90 percent of respondents polled believed vocational education in Finland had a very positive reputation.⁴¹

FOSTERING RECONNECTION FOR TODAY'S DISCONNECTED YOUTH

A recent paper looking at the problem of youth disconnection⁴²—not just in the United States but in the thirty affluent democracies of the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD)—argues that during this period of slow recovery, efforts should be redoubled to keep current students connected to education and strengthen their skills to boost their competitiveness so that they are ready when the labor market recovers. In addition, governments must provide disconnected youth more active job-search guidance and assistance, as well as job creation programs targeted at them. It also argues for a stronger safety net for young people, such that receiving assistance is not tied to having had a job that was lost. They argue that

BOX 4 Linking Academics and Technical Education in the United States: A Recipe for Success

Linked Learning in California



Linked Learning is an approach developed to offer California high school students an opportunity to combine academics with technical education; it has been highly successful in improving graduation rates and preparedness for careers in growth industries in the state. Linked Learning programs are in place in high schools across the state, funded by government, private-sector, and foundation contributions. They are designed to match the needs of major California industries, ranging from biomedicine to engineering to digital media arts. In addition to standard high school academic courses, students get technical training and hands-on work experience in the sector of their choice as well as support services such as counseling and tutoring. Graduates are prepared for a range of possible options, such as two- or four-year college programs, apprenticeships, or the military.⁴³

Revitalized Technical Education in Massachusetts

While vocational-technical education (VTE) has been declining nationally, Massachusetts has reformed and revitalized its VTE system. A network of several dozen programs, many in low-performing schools, are offering VTE programs that require the same college preparatory program as other high schools and that benefit from a standardized curriculum culminating in a certificate that Massachusetts industries regard highly. VTE experts have recognized that entry-level jobs in most fields today require the same academic preparation as college entrants. Funded by the state and supplemented with in-kind contributions from industries that benefit from a well-trained workforce, these programs are yielding lower dropout rates than the state average, and over half of program graduates go on to college.⁴⁴



social assistance for such youth should be tied to a rigorous “mutual obligations” approach—a blend of sticks and carrots that has worked well in the Netherlands. It requires disconnected youth to take part in training or education programs to receive benefits. Any training must be tailored closely to the needs of the labor market, as well as the skills profile of the disconnected youth.

In the wake of the Great Recession, the United States has offered tax credits to employers hiring disconnected youth and provided additional funding to upgrade and expand Job Corps centers, a residential program for disconnected youth that combines remedial education, work experience, and mentoring.⁴⁵ The bipartisan White House Council for Community Solutions released a report in June 2012, *Community Solutions for Opportunity Youth*, that made a comprehensive set of recommendations for addressing the needs of young people currently out of school and work. The recommendations were based on extensive research as well as a review of more than one hundred ongoing initiatives, site visits to effective programs, interviews, and meetings with community leaders and foundations. They suggested the following approaches:

- **Prioritizing cross-sectoral community-based collaboratives** that share data, avoid fragmentation, and replicate programs that have succeeded elsewhere.
- **Creating an incentive fund to spur innovation.**
- **Building shared national responsibility and accountability** by collecting data on disconnected youth, evaluating program effectiveness, and scaling up proven programs.
- **Engaging young people themselves in the creation of solutions.**
- **Creating more robust on-ramps to employment** by engaging employers themselves in the development of soft skills among disconnected youth, connecting young people to opportunities to earn credentials sought after in today's labor market, and increasing opportunities for youth to take part in service projects that provide an opportunity to build skills and gain work experience.

Conclusion

Prevention is the best cure. The long-term solution to youth disconnection is to address in a meaningful way the deep historical inequalities that persist in American society. Building connections between communities and both educational and employment opportunities is vital, as are community empowerment and greater investment in people and neighborhoods. Ensuring that families have the resources they need to help their children pass safely through the obstacle course of adolescence and early adulthood to realize their full potential benefits all Americans. Ensuring that young people and their families know about and can access a variety of pathways to a productive adulthood is vital to the future: theirs and ours.

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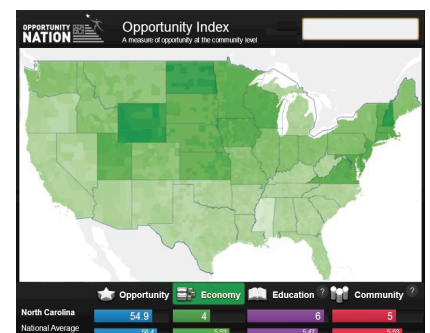
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