

KIDS COUNT Indicator Brief

Reducing the Number of Disconnected Youth

The Annie E. Casey Foundation

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As they move toward adulthood, most young Americans are either in school, in the workforce, or in the military. Their lives are shaped by the challenges and routines of an important societal institution, and by the social networks they encounter there. But a persistent minority—nearly one in ten between the ages of 16 and 19—are neither studying nor working. These young people are sometimes referred to as “idle youth.” In 2003, there were approximately 1.3 million “idle youth” nationwide. Percentages ranged from a low of 4 percent in Minnesota, Vermont and Wisconsin to a high of 14 percent in Louisiana.

When teens are neither in school nor employed, they are disconnected from the roles and relationships that set most young people on pathways toward productive adult lives. This detachment, especially if it lasts for several years, increases the risk that a young person will have lower earnings and a less stable employment history than peers who stayed in school or found jobs. Among disconnected youth, there is a sub-group of young people who face even worse odds: teens in foster care; youth involved in the juvenile justice system; teens who have children of their own; and youth who never finished high school.

Disconnected youth most at risk

Teens in foster care: Each year about 20,000 young people “age out” of the foster care system at age 18 and are expected to function independently. Few are adequately prepared for this transition. In general, states provide minimal and uneven assistance with education, employment, and housing, and only a few states provide essential health and mental health services.

Youth involved in the juvenile justice system: Each year, there are more than 600,000 admissions to secure juvenile detention centers. No experience may be more predictive of adult problems than confinement in a secure juvenile facility. Confined youth lose daily contact with families, forfeit important school time, and are unlikely to have their physical and mental health needs met.

Teen parents: National teen birth rates are falling, but these numbers are still very high—and well above those of other developed countries. Only about one-third of teen mothers go on to receive a high school diploma after having a child. Among young men who have fathered children, less than half finish high school; those who do are less likely to continue their education.

High-school dropouts: High school dropouts have long begun adulthood at a significant disadvantage. Given today’s demanding workplaces, that is more true than ever. Between 1997 and 2001, more than a quarter of all dropouts were unemployed for a year or longer, compared with only 11 percent of those who finished high school or earned a GED. Our nation’s most severe dropout problems are concentrated in 200 to 300 schools in our 35 largest cities.

Source: Nelson, D.W. (2004). *Moving youth from risk to opportunity: KIDS COUNT Essay*. Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Disconnected young women are more likely than other young adult women to rely on welfare, while young men are more likely to spend time in jail. A 1996 study estimated that that 12 percent of dropouts and 34 percent of black male dropouts were incarcerated (Lerman, 1996). Between 1999 and 2004, the number of incarcerated young adults (ages 18 to 29) increased by more than 10 percent. Up to one-third of young adults are reincarcerated within a few years after release. Those without high school diplomas, jobs, spouses or children are more likely to continue engaging in criminal behavior (Child Trends, 2005). Improving educational and employment opportunities is especially important for urban disadvantaged and minority youth. Black and Hispanic youth are nearly twice as likely to be out of school and unemployed as white youths.

Disconnected youth often become idle adults (defined as without work all year long). This is especially problematic in the central cities where idleness rates of Black men are 60 to 70 percent higher than those of their counterparts in the suburban portions of metropolitan areas. In 2002, one-quarter of young black men between the ages of 20 and 34 were without work all year long (Sum *et al*, 2004). In some places, disconnection and chronic joblessness has led to a destructive street culture that can be difficult for young people to resist. This *Indicator Brief* outlines five strategies that can help to reduce the number of disconnected youth:

- **Aim for comprehensive system reform, not just the provision or expansion of direct services**
- **Start with schools**
- **Create well structured school-to-career (STC) programs**
- **Address impediments to employment**
- **Meet adolescents' intense need for nurturance, guidance and protection**
- **Provide focused assistance to youth aging out of foster care**
- **Reform juvenile justice and build bridges for confined youth.**

Other *Indicator Briefs* in this series address the closely related challenges of reducing the teen childbearing and high school dropout rates.

1. Aim for comprehensive system reform, not just the provision or expansion of direct services.

Many kinds of youth development programs and policies are designed to keep young people engaged in productive activities, or re-engage those who are disconnected from school or work. Some focus on families, using parent skill training or strategies that involve families in program design and planning. Others involve the community, for example by involving young people in intergenerational mentoring programs or community service. Still others try to help young people by partnering with and supporting their schools (Catalano et al., 1998). All of these programs can be effective, but for young people in our nation's toughest communities, they are not sufficient. More fundamental change is required.

- **Focus efforts on the most isolated communities.** Disconnected youth often reflect the problems of disconnected communities. There are tens of thousands of rural, urban, and suburban neighborhoods in America. But many of the worst outcomes for young people can be traced to several hundred of our most isolated and disconnected neighborhoods. In these neighborhoods, youth inactivity and unemployment are often caused or aggravated by a web of related problems—poor education, inadequate health care, family problems, racism, crime, and unemployment. Reducing the number of disconnected youth requires intensive, sustained efforts to reverse the social isolation and disenfranchisement of low-income neighborhoods. Expanding the resources and services available to these communities is a crucial step, but it is not sufficient.
- **Work toward simultaneous changes in many youth-serving systems, as well as changes in the relationships among those systems.** Experience from Casey's New Futures initiative and other projects suggests that improving outcomes for youth requires fundamental and deep changes in existing institutions and systems, such as school districts, child welfare agencies, juvenile justice systems, and other youth-serving institutions. In part, this may involve reorienting human service systems and resources to the neighborhood level, with local residents taking the lead in planning, implementing, and staffing all human service and community building activities. This kind of comprehensive system-reform agenda is immensely difficult to achieve. It is difficult to communicate clearly the aim, design, and expectations of this kind of complex, multifaceted effort. And it is very hard to manage a change process that depends on diverse parts of the community for success. Systemic change necessitates the development of collaborative governing bodies. It requires considerable time and resources and sustained effort. However, the

alternative—merely providing or augmenting direct services—cannot fully succeed (Nelson, 1996).

- **In particular, address pervasive, systemic problems in the juvenile justice system that impede youth development.** Our nation’s juvenile justice system is flawed in ways that undermine the goals of rehabilitation and youth development. Key challenges include overwhelmed courts, under-investment in community-based services, and a marked trend toward prosecuting youth in adult courts. On any given day, approximately 10 percent of incarcerated youth are being held in adult facilities (Coalition for Juvenile Justice). According to U.S. Department of Justice data, in mid-2004, 2,477 prisoners in state prisons and 7,083 inmates in local jails were under age 18. And between 1984 and 1997, the number of youth housed in adult prisons nearly doubled (Brown, DeJesus, Maxwell, and Schiraldi, 2000). When young people are prosecuted as adults and incarcerated in adult prisons, they are more likely to commit new crimes sooner and commit more serious crimes than youth who remain in the juvenile justice system; eight times more likely to commit suicide; five times more likely to be sexually assaulted; and twice as likely to be physically assaulted (National Youth Development Information Center).

This trend can have long-lasting effects. A history of incarceration can pose a steep obstacle to school completion or employment, and immediate post-release difficulties in obtaining work lead many former prisoners to adopt lifestyles that are based on idle time and pre-prison associations (Moore, 1996). Alternative sentencing, education and job preparation for inmates, and job placement or work experience for ex-offenders are key prevention efforts (AECF, 1997). Public awareness campaigns are also needed to correct common misperceptions about juvenile crime. For example, despite a 68 percent drop in juvenile homicides since 1993, two out of three Americans believe that youth crime is on the rise. Polls show that the public believes that youth are responsible for nearly half of all homicides, when in fact they are involved in less than one-tenth of such crimes (Brown, DeJesus, Maxwell & Schiraldi, 2000).

- **Support “natural helpers” in communities that are home to many disconnected youth.** Young people who spend long stretches of time out of school and out of work often face multiple risks and day-to-day difficulties. Compared with other teens and young adults, they are more likely to live in single-parent and low-income families, families that receive welfare, and families in which parents lack high school diplomas. They are especially likely to have low achievement

test scores and are more likely to be teen parents. Disconnected youth often need intensive help, but professionals may not always understand contextual issues or know how to be most helpful, and they may not speak the same language (literally or figuratively) as the young people they are trying to assist. People who live in the community, often working in collaboration with professionals, can provide more effective assistance or mentoring and are often available on a longer-term basis. Community members can also serve as “translators” to explain how formal societal systems—schools, jobs, or the courts—work. Young people can benefit from initiatives that provide resources and support to natural helpers, such as People Helping People, founded in Washington state in 1995 (Apple et al. 2001).

2. Start with schools

Schools are a good place to begin addressing the problems of disconnected youth, since the vast majority of children are enrolled into their mid-teens. Those with very weak basic skills are at highest risk of becoming disconnected youth. One study showed that 30 percent of the men and 40 percent of the women scoring in the bottom 25 percent of the Armed Forces Qualifying Test (a measure of basic skills) were disconnected from school, work, and marriage for at least three years (Besharov & Gardiner, 1996). Education reform strategies cannot wait until middle or high school.

- **Expand access to high-quality, comprehensive early care and education.** A landmark study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported on research that followed nearly 1,000 children—most of whom were African American—from low-income families who took part in the Chicago Child-Parent Center (CPC) study in the mid-1980s. The study concluded that, “Public investments in early educational programs in the first decade of life can contribute positively to children’s later success.” Specifically, the study found that, compared with similar children who were not in the program, participants had higher educational attainment up to age 20. Program participants stayed in school somewhat longer and were more likely to graduate from high school. The study also found that, relative to the comparison group, CPC participants had lower rates of juvenile and violent arrests (Reynolds, et al., 2001).
- **Prevent disengagement early in children’s school careers.** The process of disengagement may begin as early as a child’s entry into school (Carnegie Task Force on Learning in the Primary Grades, 1996). Educators need to foster “investment” behavior beginning in the earliest years of schooling by helping children stay involved in school-day and extracurricular activities,

addressing weak academic and social skills, and rewarding effort (Rossi & Montgomery, 1994). In recent years, the percentage of students at every age who are highly engaged by school has dropped significantly. A 2004 study by The Urban Institute reported that, between 1999 and 2002, the percentage of 12- to 17-year-olds found to be highly engaged in school (on the basis of parents' responses to four questions) dropped from 38.2 to 30.9 (Vandivere et al., 2004). According to the National Research Council, in coming years, education research needs to focus more intensively on the issue of motivation, with a view toward strengthening schools' ability to engage and hold students (Vandivere et al., 2004; National Research Council, 1999).

- **Improve the match between what schools teach and what disadvantaged youth need.** Schools can increase their holding power by emphasizing real-world experience and problem solving, integrating academic and vocational skills so that students are well prepared for both higher education and the job market; and introducing assessments that take into account students' accomplishments and mastery of tasks. In addition to the traditional three R's, young people need foundational skills that include the ability to listen and speak to people they do not know and to negotiate a variety of new situations. They need to be able to solve problems; manage time, money, and materials; use computers; work as a member of a team; deal with cultural diversity; and have a basic grasp of how organizations and systems work. Traditional curricula need to be expanded to encompass these competencies (SCANS, 1992).
- **Structure high schools in ways that help students feel known.** Research shows that large school size has a negative impact on attendance, school climate, and student participation in school activities and contributes to high dropout rates. If school districts have to make do with very large school buildings, they can create smaller units within large schools and allow students to have the same advisor or counselor over more than one year.
- **Increase the incentives for youth to work hard in high school.** Many students exert little effort in high school. In a national survey, less than one-third of tenth graders said that they do one hour or less of homework each week (Rosenbaum, 2002). If employers received and reviewed high school transcripts, and took them into account in hiring decisions, students who do not expect to attend college would have greater motivation to stay in school and exert effort.

4. Create well-structured school-to-career (STC) programs

For at-risk students to become invested in learning, the payoff to learning must become clearer and more realistic. School-to-career programs can serve this purpose. Moreover, inner-city student who take part in such programs are more likely to enter college than they would have been if they had only taken standard classes (Jobs for the Future, 1995). STC programs can help students acquire the informal skills needed to succeed in the workplace, including the attitudes and work habits employers require.

- **Teach students the “soft skills” that employers value.** Employers say that their most pressing need is for soft skills—work habits and social skills. They stress attendance, dependability, perseverance, attention to quality, and the ability to work with others. Many employers report that some new employees have little idea of what is expected of them on the job. For example, they report that workers who were absent three days in the first week expected that their excuses would be accepted and were surprised when they were fired. While some employers provide training in academic or technical skills, few provide training in soft skills or work habits (Rosenbaum, 2002).
- **Help students find part-time jobs.** In terms of later earning power, at-risk students benefit even more than other students from having a part-time job. Schools can encourage work-based learning that can improve the motivation and ability of young people to achieve academic goals. School-linked part-time jobs provide better learning opportunities, reinforce academic skills, and improve work attitudes more than unsupervised work.
- **Strengthen school-based job placement efforts.** Young people who live in disinvested communities often lack the social networks and personal contacts that help entry-level workers learn about and land good jobs. School-to-career programs can give employers a chance to get to know and gain confidence in disadvantaged youth.

5. Help young adults address obstacles to employment

In neighborhoods with entrenched poverty, employment and training programs are not sufficient. In these neighborhoods, the kind of infrastructure and services that people need in order to find and sustain employment may be limited. It is often necessary to help young people address barriers to work, including inadequate transportation, a lack of child care, health problems, drug and alcohol addictions, criminal

records, domestic violence, mental illness, sub-standard and/or unstable housing, linguistic isolation, and immigration problems (Alligood & Dressner, 2000).

- **Help youth find meaningful employment.** Well designed, comprehensive and well implemented workforce development programs can help youth find and hold jobs. Such programs provide clear, long-term pathways toward careers. Temporary employment programs without support services bring little or no benefits to disadvantaged youth once they have left the program. However, not all employment benefits young people. When students work in excess of 15 to 20 hours per week during the school year, their academic achievement suffers and they are more likely to use alcohol and drugs. Moreover, the kinds of jobs teens find tend to require little skill or training, involve simple repetitive tasks. Such jobs have less benefit than those that are more engaging and offer more contact with and bonding to adults.
- **Take a “work first” approach.** Young people benefit when they can gain work experience while they are dealing with issues that have caused their disconnection from school or jobs. Some employment programs or organizations offer immediate work experiences through jobs they control in their own agencies or jobs they have created through social business ventures (Alligood & Dressner, 2000).
- **Support place-based efforts to improve employment opportunities.** A frequent finding of employment programs for disadvantaged people is that family members and partners who do not work can undermine the efforts of those who try (Dressner, Fleischer and Sherwood, 1998). It is often advantageous for employment programs to serve entire families and social networks—not just individuals.
- **Help young people gain access to job sites.** Transportation is a major barrier to employment, especially as more jobs open up in the suburbs.

6. Recognize young people’s intense need for nurturance, guidance and protection

In recent years, there has been an expansion of research on adolescence. If there is one overarching lesson that has emerged from this research, it is that teens are vulnerable. Their bodies, and especially their brains, are still growing; their development across all dimensions (physical, social, emotional, intellectual) is comparable to the rapid growth that takes place during the first years of life. Most are

inexperienced in problem-solving and lack the skills needed to cope with the stressful settings and complex problems they encounter.

- **Support efforts aimed at strengthening families.** Parents in high-risk neighborhoods spend a great deal of effort sheltering and protecting children. Constructive neighborhood networks become very important for effective parenting. Family strength is also a key to making community controls possible. Families can provide critical supervision of youth peer groups.
- **Support mentoring programs.** Studies of resilient youth show that sustained relationships with adults in the community can help students thrive despite adverse conditions. Mentors can also help young people make the transition from school to work.
- **Address violence against teens.** The abuse and neglect of teens is underreported and, generally speaking, underestimated as a problem. Teens are victims of violence at disproportionately high rates, and account for about one-third of all victims of violence (including robbery, assault, rape, and murder). By the end of high school, between 10 and 25 percent of girls and between 4 and 10 percent of boys are estimated to have been sexually abused. In recent years, there has been greater recognition that many teens, in and out of school, face intense bullying, teasing, and harassment.

7. Provide focused assistance to youth who are aging out of foster care. With frequent histories of abuse and neglect and lack of stable family ties, teens in the foster care system are more likely to become disconnected youth than their peers. Many drop out of high school and are unemployed. Many have emotional and physical health problems. And many are homeless. A 1997 study showed that more than half of all young adults accessing federally funded youth shelters had previously been in foster care. Most American youth are not fully independent until their mid-20s, but foster children are expected to manage on their own at age 18 without any assistance.

Research confirms that a large proportion of the more than 20,000 young people who “age out” of the foster care system do not have the knowledge or skills they need to make a successful transition to adulthood. They have high rates of poverty, homelessness and pregnancy. They are more likely to wind up in the criminal justice system and as victims of crime. Less than 50 percent graduate from college, and only a very few ever have the chance to attend college (Child Welfare League of America, 1999). As they move into the teen years, foster children can get help with education and employment, preparation for

daily living, and transitional support, but federally funded programs providing these services reach only 60 to 70 percent of eligible foster care adolescents. Moreover, assistance for young people between the ages of 18 and 21 is limited (AECF, 2001). Efforts to address the needs of transitioning foster youth include:

- **Increase the odds that adolescents removed from their homes can connect to strong families and do more to help those in foster care successfully transition to adulthood.** For any young person, the most powerful predictor of future success is a connection to a caring and supportive family. The older a child gets, the less likely it is that the foster care system will find a suitable foster family or relative willing to provide care. Even those who do get placed with a foster family often have a difficult time adjusting to their new home. It is therefore important to promote strong family connections for young people in foster care.
- **Recruit and train talented foster parents.** It is important to recruit committed, talented foster parents and supporting them with training and a range of ongoing services that enable them to provide a stable family connection for even the most vulnerable adolescents.
- **Provide foster children the supports they need once they age out of care.** In most cases, the key elements of a successful transition include helping young people complete school, make plans for the future, maintain enduring relationships with family members or caring adults, and finding an affordable place to live.
- **At the system level, develop networks of foster care.** These networks can provide birth and foster families with the ongoing support they need. To be effective, such networks should be family-centered, culturally sensitive, and located in the neighborhoods where children live. Such networks must be committed to ensuring that all foster children, including adolescents and their siblings, are routinely placed with families rather than in institutional settings.
- **Work toward improvement at the local and state levels.** Policymakers can use creative strategies to increase the number and quality of foster and kinship families; make better decisions about child placement and treatment by using a team decision-making approach (including foster families, birth families, and child welfare personnel).
- **Engage youth directly in efforts to improve outcomes for youth leaving foster care.** Communities can organize youth leadership boards and community partnership boards, bringing youth and civic leaders together to develop new options for transitioning youth.

- **Provide transitioning youth with Opportunity Passports.** This tool is designed to organize resources to create opportunities—financial, educational, vocational, health care, entrepreneurial, and recreational—for transitioning youth. It may include a personal debit account; a matched savings account. Locally developed benefits can be added, such as “Door Openers” designed to expedite access to community college registration, job training opportunities, adult education courses, part-time jobs, subsidized housing, and other benefits.
- **Increase the odds of college enrollment for transitioning youth.** Transitioning foster youth can be provided with scholarships for tuition, books, food, and transportation, plus a comprehensive support system that includes outreach, mentoring, and counseling services.

8. Reform juvenile justice and build bridges for confined youth. There is a critical need to address our national over-reliance on incarcerating young offenders, especially since two-thirds are detained for non-violent offenses. Given evidence that confinement undermines young people’s transition into responsible adulthood, policymakers must find better ways to address the needs of troubled youth. Avoiding the unnecessary use of confinement is a critical element of a strategy to prevent young offenders from becoming disconnected young adults.

- **To reduce incarceration rates, use effective screening tools, accurate data, and proven community-based alternatives to incarceration.** Such strategies hold promise for reducing the costly confinement of youth in detention without increasing youth crime or recidivism.
- **Reduce overcrowding.** This increases the probability that detention facilities will become safer, more responsive to those youth for whom incarceration is appropriate.
- **Help detained youth re-connected to school, work, and community upon their release.** The best programs take a comprehensive approach, helping youth become economically self-sufficient and build on their strengths.

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Youth Education Scholarship (YES)

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