

ZEROING IN ON RACE AND PLACE

YOUTH DISCONNECTION IN AMERICA'S CITIES



Disconnected youth are teenagers and young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither working nor in school. There are 5,527,000 disconnected youth in America today, or **one in seven young adults (13.8 percent)**—about as many people as live in Minnesota. **The national disconnected youth population is larger than the populations of thirty US states.**

The good news is that the rate of **youth disconnection has fallen since the Great Recession**. Roughly 280,000 fewer young people are disconnected today than in 2010, the peak year for youth disconnection during the last decade. Beneath the national rate of 13.8 percent, however, lies staggering variation. In some cities and among some racial and ethnic groups, young people who are neither in school nor working are few and far between. In others, youth disconnection is an everyday reality, tragically persistent and commonplace.

The costs of disconnection are high, both for individuals and for society. Disconnected youth are **cut off** from the people, institutions, and experiences that would otherwise help them develop the knowledge, skills, maturity, and sense of purpose required to live rewarding lives as adults. And the negative effects of youth disconnection ricochet across the economy, the social sector, the criminal justice system, and the political landscape, affecting all of us. Our analysis of a very small subset of the direct costs of youth disconnection reveals an astonishingly high cost to taxpayers: **\$26.8 billion in 2013 alone**, or nearly the entire amount the federal government spends on science.

Zeroing In on Place and Race was written to shine a light on the nature and extent of this problem at the national level, in nearly 100 cities, and among the country's major racial and ethnic groups. It provides practitioners and policymakers the up-to-date data necessary to target and tailor interventions and assess the effectiveness of programmatic efforts.

Of the ninety-eight major metro areas included in this report—home to two in three Americans—disconnection rates range from under 8 percent in the **Omaha, Nebraska, and Bridgeport, Connecticut,** metro areas to over 20 percent in greater **Lakeland, Florida; Bakersfield, California; and Memphis, Tennessee.**

At the national level, youth disconnection rates for **blacks** (21.6 percent), **Native Americans** (27.8 percent), and **Latinos** (16.3 percent) are markedly higher than rates for **Asian Americans** (7.9 percent) or **whites** (11.3 percent). In nine metro areas, at least one in four black youth are disconnected. And in nine metro areas, at least one in five Latino youth are disconnected.

Although national patterns are generally mirrored in metro areas, important variation exists. For instance, a city can simultaneously be among the best for one racial or ethnic group and among the worst for another. The greater **Boston** metro area, which has a low overall disconnection rate (8.2 percent), is relatively good for white (6.8 percent) and black youth (9.8 percent), but not for Latinos (17.3 percent). In the **Chicago** metro area, both whites and Latinos are doing better than they are in the country as a whole (7.5 and 13.9 percent, respectively), but blacks are doing much worse (24.5 percent).

Place matters. Race matters. But our analysis shows that the combination of the two really packs a wallop. Residential segregation by race, while no longer legal, is nonetheless the de facto, on-the-ground reality for many Americans. It produces concentrations of poverty and isolation as well as islands of affluence and connection, from Ferguson and Baltimore to Los Angeles and New York. New research for this report shows that racial segregation has dramatic but very different consequences for young people depending on their race. Our research shows that **in highly segregated metro areas, black youth tend to have higher-than-average rates of disconnection, whereas white youth tend to have lower-than-average rates of disconnection.** In other words, **residential segregation by race disproportionately harms black teenagers and young adults.**

The problem is complex and highly variable. What are the solutions?

This study shows clearly that disconnected young people face challenges beyond what they can tackle alone. To alter the trajectory of his or her life, a young person needs perseverance, the ability to delay gratification, the optimism to envision a better future, and the willingness to work toward it. **But these personal characteristics, while necessary, are simply not sufficient. Disconnection is not a spontaneously occurring phenomenon; it is an outcome years in the making.** Engaged young people from middle class neighborhoods rarely drop out or drift away from the worlds of school and work. Disconnected young people tend to come from communities that are themselves disconnected from the mainstream by segregation and concentrated disadvantage, and young people's struggles with education and employment mirror those of their parents and neighbors. Currently, we're spending our time, money, and effort fighting the symptoms of youth disconnection **instead of addressing its root causes.** Knitting disconnected, opportunity-scarce communities into the fabric of our wider society and creating meaningful pathways within them is the answer to youth disconnection.

We hope that the data and analysis contained in this report will make previously invisible groups visible and help those working to reconnect young people and prevent future disconnection succeed in their efforts. These young people deserve a meaningful shot at their own American Dreams.