# HALVE THE GAP BY 2030

## YOUTH DISCONNECTION IN AMERICA'S CITIES

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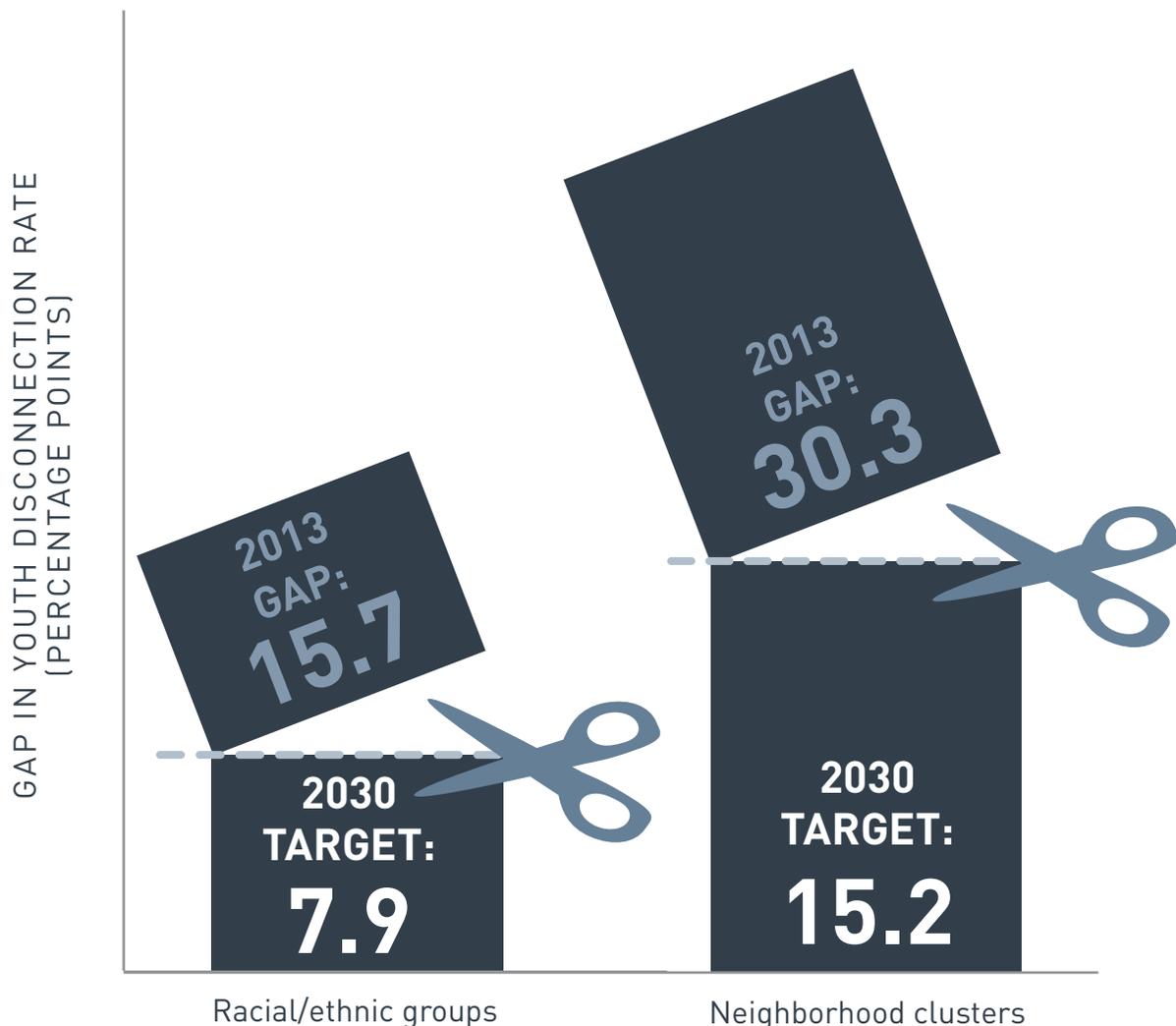
GAP IN YOUTH DISCONNECTION RATE (PERCENTAGE POINTS)

2013 GAP: 15.7

2030 TARGET: 7.9

Racial/ethnic groups

2013 GAP: 30.3

2030 TARGET: 15.2

Neighborhood clusters

MEASURE OF AMERICA
of the Social Science Research Council

# The Way Forward

Measure of America's work on disconnected youth has made one point abundantly clear: youth disconnection is a stubborn and complex problem with no easy solution.

The current focus of many actors is on job readiness and jobs. Jobs are doubtless a key part of the puzzle. Private sector firms that establish mentoring, internship, and entry-level jobs programs are providing a vital, much-needed service. Excellent organizations and coalitions are on the ground across the country helping young people develop the skills they need to get their lives on track. New educational models that make high school more compelling and relevant to at-risk kids, build on-the-job experience into the curriculum, and create clear school-to-work pathways are taking hold.

**But more is needed.** Many of these adrift young people have challenges that extend well beyond getting that first job or completing a GED. As the above analysis makes clear, the typical disconnected youth has had a limited, low-quality education and has grown up in poverty, surrounded by others who are likewise disadvantaged in a neighborhood where youth disconnection is so entrenched as to be normative. The adults in this young person's life also struggle with connection—they have little education, are frequently out of work, and have limited social networks.

It's not enough to offer narrow interventions late in the game. Social and economic conditions in the country as a whole and in the neighborhoods where the overwhelming majority of these young people grow up shape the choices and opportunities open to them. Looking only at the ranks of disconnected youth that swelled from 5 million in 2007 to 5.8 million by 2010, the economic downturn took the opportunities of hundreds of thousands of young people along with it. And no recovery is in sight in the low-income neighborhoods where the lion's share of these youth live.

**The youth disconnection crisis requires three sets of actions of us as a society. First, we must take active steps to reengage and reconnect young people who are disconnected today. Second, we need to prevent disconnection in the future by improving the conditions and opportunities in today's high-disconnection communities. And third, organizations and individuals actively working in this area must join together to establish measureable, time-bound targets for reducing youth disconnection; these targets should be ambitious, tailored to the**

The crisis of youth disconnection requires three sets of actions of us as a society:

1. Anchor Disconnected Youth

2. Prevent Disconnection

3. Halve the Gap by 2030

**on-the-ground realities of different cities, and based on an accelerated, but achievable, rate of progress.**

**Anchor Disconnected Youth**

Historically, second-chance programs for adolescents and young adults have had limited success.[14] But new models have shown great promise in recent years by not only providing job training but also connecting young people to employment and support services. In addition, consensus is growing that the problem of youth disconnection requires that the different agencies and systems that deal with disconnected youth align their resources such that their collective impact is greater than the sum of their parts. The Aspen Forum for Community Solutions has just awarded grants to twenty-one partners that will test a variety of community-level approaches to connecting disconnected young people to school and work. All will employ cross-sectoral, collaborative means that bring education, the foster care system, the justice system, philanthropic organizations, and the private sector together to help disconnected youth transition to a productive adulthood. The hope is that from these pilot efforts will emerge high-quality evidence about what works.

**Prevent Disconnection**

It is easier and cheaper—not to mention kinder and more just—to keep young people in school and on track than to reengage them as teens and young adults. This requires ensuring that children are ready to learn when they start school, that they remain attached to educational institutions through high school, and that viable, attractive postsecondary options exist for young people who do not choose a traditional, four-year bachelor's degree program.

How to prevent youth disconnection is not a mystery. But it does requires a number of steps:

**Support young parents.** Programs like the Nurse Family Partnership help fragile families, particularly young parents with little education, learn the skills they need to be the parents they want to be with early interventions—and break the inter-generational transmission of disconnection.

**Give at-risk children access to high-quality, center-based preschool programs.** Preschool may seem a long way off from these young adult years. But preschool is not just about learning to count and write the ABCs. Research shows that a quality preschool experience has a higher

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return than any other educational investment. By teaching critical social and emotional skills like persistence, impulse control, and emotional regulation, high-quality preschool prepares children to succeed in school; the benefits of these noncognitive skills compound over time, resulting in higher high school graduation rates, less crime, fewer behavioral problems, fewer teen births, greater workforce attachment, and higher wages.[15] Momentum is growing around the country for universal access to preschool, and local-level programs like those recently launched in Washington, DC, and Los Angeles have shown how such programs meet the needs of parents as well as children.

**Get schools to act on dropout warning signs.** Keeping children from leaving school is easier than getting them back. Repeating a grade, failing more than one class, and frequent absence from school are well-known early warning signs that a child is at heightened risk for dropping out. Such children require early identification and intensive services to address the obstacles they face to school success—which can range from learning disabilities to problems at home.

**Give at-risk children the supportive services they need.** Disabled youth, youth in juvenile detention or residential medical facilities, runaways, youth aging out of foster care, young parents, and young people facing mental illness or severe family crisis all face a heightened risk of youth disconnection. Though their challenges are varied, their numbers are sufficiently few to make a meaningful response possible. Greater coordination across the systems and agencies that assist these vulnerable populations is needed to generate collective impact.

**Embrace our boys and young men of color.** Young men of color in American society today are disproportionately marginalized in school, monitored in their neighborhoods, discriminated against in the labor market, and put behind bars. School discipline practices are pushing African American and Latino boys out of the classroom due to the lack of culturally competent curricula and loosely defined, unevenly applied suspension and expulsion practices. Policing practices like New York's stop-and-frisk policy, recently ruled unconstitutional, subject hundreds of thousands of innocent African American and Latino young men to police stops and street interrogation.[16] A dismaying 2009 study found that African American job applicants were half as likely as equally qualified white applicants to receive a callback or job offer—and about as likely to be offered a job as a white applicant just released from prison.[17] The high rates of youth disconnection among young people of color in our cities gives lie to the nation's promise of equality. Our education and justice

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systems must take a different approach, one in which the vast resources now deployed to isolate and disenfranchise black and brown boys and men are instead deployed in support of their hopes and dreams.

**Make meaningful postsecondary options available to all young people, including those who are not bound for a four-year bachelor's degree program.** Career and technical paths that are linked to internships, job placement, life skills classes, and postsecondary certificate or degree programs can build bridges to a productive, rewarding adulthood for young people whose interests and aspirations are not best served by a traditional bachelor's degree program. In many European countries, the majority of students undertake a vocational track for secondary education. Already, many programs that link career and technical education in high school to postsecondary institutions and jobs have shown promise in the United States.

Preventing disconnection is not just the job of schools. It also requires improving the conditions in low-income communities. This means improving transportation between poor and more affluent neighborhoods, so that residents can access often-distant jobs and educational opportunities. It means changing the relationship between communities and the police so that streets are safe but young men of color are not disproportionately targeted for tactics like stop and frisk that can leave them at a permanent disadvantage in the labor market. And it means tackling racial discrimination as well as concentrated poverty and residential segregation, whose pernicious effects on youth opportunity are well documented.

**Our alternatives are clear: we can pay now, or we can pay later.** We can pay now by investing in supportive interventions with fragile families, high-quality preschool, wrap-around schools for poor children, relevant high school curricula that includes career and technical education, apprenticeship and other "on ramp" programs for young people, greater assistance to low-income young people to attend college and certificate programs, and jobs programs that target disconnected young people. Or we can pay later, picking up the tab for juvenile justice, incarceration, crime, public assistance, higher health costs, reduced American competitiveness, and lost tax revenues.

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**Halve the Gap by 2030!**

What if the diverse actors who work with disconnected young people—educational institutions, social service delivery organizations, the justice system, the private and nonprofit sectors, and others—not only agreed to coordinate, work together, and build synergies but also decided **what exactly success would look like?** What if this success was defined not by meetings held, dollars spent, classes conducted, reports written, and best practices identified but rather by **a decrease in the youth disconnection rate?**

Our recommendation is that the key relevant actors join together to set an ambitious target, namely, to **halve the gap by 2030.**

Many readers may think that a proposal to get the stakeholders involved in this issue to agree on a shared target is naïve. We would counter that it can hardly be more difficult than getting all the world's political leaders to sign on to not one but eight ambitious global goals to fight poverty—yet that is what happened in 2000 with the Millennium Development Goals, an ambitious plan to dramatically reduce extreme poverty that has accelerated progress around the world (see **BOX 4**).

What might halving the gap look like? Setting a goal to cut the national youth disconnection rate from 14.6 to 7.3 percent by 2030 is appealing in its simplicity. However, a national goal is too removed from the on-the-ground efforts in communities across the country required to meet it. More motivating and meaningful would be to adopt the goal of cutting in half the gap between neighborhoods and between racial and ethnic groups **within each metro area.** This formulation is at once universal and

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**BOX 4:** **Setting targets, tracking progress, meeting goals**

Interest in metrics and outcome measurement has been growing in the United States in recent years. Where the US is falling behind many other countries and the international development community, however, is in using data not just to establish baselines and measure progress but also to **set ambitious goals** around which a group of actors can rally.

The Millennium Development Goals, eight ambitious, time-bound targets for ending extreme deprivation by 2015, are an excellent example of this sort of effort. In 2000, heads-of-state from nearly every country in the world pledged to cut extreme poverty in half, achieve universal primary education, reduce the under-five mortality rate by two-thirds, halt the spread of AIDS, and more from a 1990 starting point to a 2015 end-date. The Goals galvanized resources and action and encouraged diverse actors to pull together toward the same ends. Though not all targets will be met by 2015, some already have been, among them the safe water, education, extreme poverty, and hunger targets.

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particular. Here's how it would work using Philadelphia and Denver as examples.

In **Philadelphia**, the African American youth disconnection rate is 25.2 percent, and the white rate is 8.9 percent—a gap of 16.3 percentage points. In terms of neighborhood clusters, the highest youth disconnection rate is 30 percent, the lowest 3.2—a gap of 26.8 percentage points. The target would be no more than 8.15 percentage points separating African Americans and whites, and no more than 13.4 percentage points separating neighborhoods. These target gaps are still large, but given how vast the current gaps are, these reductions would represent significant, achievable objectives.

In **Denver**, the Latino disconnection rate is 18.2 percent, and the white rate is 10 percent, a gap of 8.2 percentage points. In terms of neighborhood clusters, the highest youth disconnection rate is 26.4 percent, the lowest 6.2—a gap of 20.2 percentage points. The target gaps for 2030 in Denver are smaller than the target gaps in Philadelphia simply because Denver has a slightly shorter road to travel.

Of course, another way to close these gaps would be for the best-performing groups to get worse. **In order to make real progress toward this goal, the overall metro area and the best-performing groups must not backslide.**

Why do we advocate only halving the gap, not eliminating disconnection entirely? A zero percent disconnection rate is unrealistic. There will always be young people who withdraw from school and work for a limited or prolonged period due to misfortune, such as an accident, crisis, or serious physical or mental illness; in order to care for a new baby or an ailing or disabled relative; or to take an extended trip or prepare for a difficult professional exam, among other reasons. About 3 percent is the lowest observed disconnection rate for the neighborhood clusters in this study.

If the end date for halving the gap is 2030, then the oldest of the 16–24 target age group are seven years old today, and the youngest will not be born until next year. There is still ample time to prevent even the oldest cohort, now first and second graders, from becoming detached from school, and at least half of them can benefit from preschool.

Disconnected young people are a difficult population to serve. They are nearly adult, sometimes truculent, often sexually active, and vexingly prone to take actions that defy common sense. They are associated

**Halve the Gap in Philadelphia**
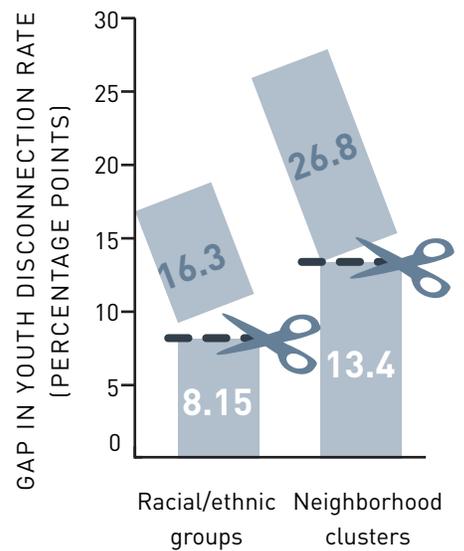


**Halve the Gap in Denver**
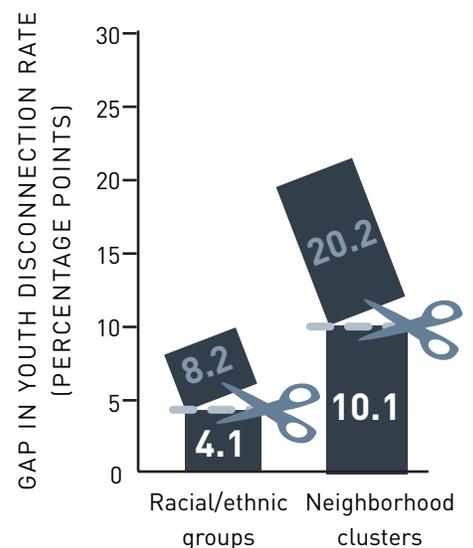
with, and even blamed for, a raft of societal ills like crime, gangs, and teen pregnancy. It doesn't help that, like most teens and young adults, they sometimes do things that madden their elders, expose them to seemingly pointless risk, and run counter to their best interests. But unlike their connected counterparts, disconnected youth are very often not attached to structures and embedded in communities that have sufficient resources to channel their energies productively, limit their scope for acting on bad decisions, provide some protection from the consequences of poor judgment, or offer tangible incentives for staying on track.

**This group can be hard to help—but we can't give up on them. Society has a vested interest in supporting their efforts to find purpose, meaning, and a productive place in the mainstream.**

The following **Metro Area Close-Ups** zoom in on each of the twenty-five most populous US cities, with maps; rates by race, ethnicity, gender, and neighborhood cluster; and key well-being indicators. They include:

1. Boston
2. Minneapolis–St. Paul
3. Washington, DC
4. San Diego
5. San Francisco
6. Pittsburgh
7. Denver
8. Seattle
9. Chicago
10. Houston
11. St. Louis
12. Philadelphia
13. Baltimore
14. New York
15. Los Angeles
16. Dallas–Ft. Worth
17. San Antonio
18. Tampa–St. Petersburg
19. Miami
20. Atlanta
21. Portland
22. Phoenix
23. Charlotte
24. Detroit
25. Riverside–San Bernardino

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**SERVICES**
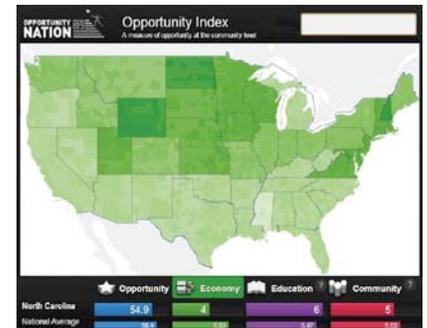
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