

Zeroing In on Place and Race

Youth Disconnection in America's Cities



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Now What? Recommendations

This work makes clear 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.** Absent a family catastrophe, an addiction disorder, or the onset of mental illness, engaged young people from middle-class neighborhoods rarely drop out or drift away from the worlds of school and work; this comparatively anchored population is by and large not the one we need to worry about when it comes to youth disconnection. Disconnected young people tend to come from communities that are themselves disconnected from the mainstream by segregation and concentrated disadvantage, and their struggles with education and employment mirror those of their parents and neighbors. Connecting these communities to the wider society and creating meaningful opportunities within them is the answer to youth disconnection.

We are already paying for failure. Even leaving aside the human costs of wasted potential, a conservative estimate of a narrow range of direct financial costs associated with the country's 5.5 million disconnected youth—including incarceration, Medicaid, public assistance, and Supplemental Security Income payments—tallies \$26.8 billion for 2013 alone. Society is already paying these costs, and many more, not just in 2013, but year after year. Imagine other ways in which this sum might be spent. It is sufficient to pay for more than 800,000 young people to obtain a trade school degree, or for 2.2 million to complete community college degrees. It could fund the participation of every disconnected young person in California in the state's successful high-school-based Linked Learning Program 6,000 times over.

We need to invest in success—which means preventing disconnection in the first place. It is almost always cheaper, and certainly more humane, to prevent problems from taking root than to wait until they are full-blown crises to respond. Rigorous evaluations suggest the following are cost-effective investments in preventing youth disconnection.

Helping at-risk parents help their children get a good start is key; proven programs like the Nurse-Family Partnership should be expanded.

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The expert consensus is that a quality preschool for 3- and 4-year olds, particularly for at-risk children, is one of the most worthwhile interventions available. It is not only learning to count and recite the alphabet that makes the difference. The social and emotional skills taught in these early years—learning to wait your turn, be on time, work with others— are critical ingredients for success throughout life. High-quality preschool is associated with fewer behavioral problems, higher high school graduation rates, less crime, fewer teen births, and higher wages and rates of homeownership.¹⁷

Another clear investment priority is high-quality K–12 schooling. Children growing up in disadvantaged circumstances need schools with the expertise and resources to provide high-quality academic instruction; a safe, healthy, and respectful environment; and support, both during and out of normal school hours, for at-risk children and children exhibiting dropout warning signs. In some of America’s schools, we are exceeding standards in all of these areas. In others, particularly those in high-disconnection areas, we are coming up woefully short.

Creating diverse pathways to meaningful careers through measures like apprenticeship and mentoring programs can help at-risk youth successfully navigate the school-to-work transition by providing support, relevant instruction, and a clear end goal. These include innovative high school–based programs such as Linked Learning, which provides high school students with real-world job experience and engaging experiential learning curriculum, and partnerships between high schools, community colleges, and local businesses. Lastly, evidence suggests that civic engagement makes youth disconnection less likely. A joint research project between Measure of America and Opportunity Nation found that civic engagement may help youth, particularly low-income teens and young adults, build social capital and skills that can help them find meaningful education and career pathways. Youth who volunteer are considerably less likely than their non-volunteering peers to be disconnected from work and school. In fact, the likelihood that a young person will be disconnected drops nearly in half if he or she volunteers.¹⁸

But those who are already disconnected need a second chance.

Reconnecting young people who are isolated from the worlds of school and work costs more than preventing disconnection in the first place. But we cannot abandon them. They need a second chance—especially since so many didn’t really get a decent first chance. Rigorous evaluations of existing “second chance” programs reinforce the notion that a problem that took many years to develop cannot be solved quickly or simply.

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Matching disconnected youth with one-off summer internships or low-wage jobs does not plant them firmly on the path to a productive and secure adulthood. They tend to need additional support to grapple with personal and family issues, gain credentials, develop soft skills and confidence, address health issues, deal with housing and transportation issues, and more.

More and higher-quality data are necessary regarding which approaches work with which populations. To meet this need, the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions awarded grants to twenty-one partners to test a variety of community-level approaches to connecting disconnected young people with education and employment. This effort will provide valuable evidence to inform future programming.

We need to set goals and work toward them together. Meaningful progress requires that organizations and individuals active in this area join together to establish measurable, time-bound targets for reducing youth disconnection. These targets should be ambitious, tailored to the on-the-ground realities of different cities, and based on an accelerated, but achievable, rate of progress. A meaningful starting point would be for cities to adopt the goal of cutting in half the gap between racial and ethnic groups within their metro areas. Here's how it would work, using Chicago as an example. Chicago's disconnection rate for black youth is 24.5 percent, and for white youth, 7.5 percent—a 17 percent gap. Narrowing the black-white gap to 8.5 percent, which would mean a black disconnection rate of 16 percent, would not be easy, but it is possible. Setting targets like this in metro areas across the country would make the plight of these young people visible at a more local level, spur community actors to get involved, and accelerate progress toward a better future.

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