

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

KEY POINTS:

- The 2020 youth disconnection rate will spike.
- Disconnected youth and their families will be hardest hit.
- We have enough money to solve youth disconnection.
- This report shines a spotlight on our most vulnerable communities.
- One size doesn't fit all.
- The danger that current disconnected youth will be further left behind is very real.



Covid-19 has likely erased ten years' progress in reducing the national youth disconnection rate in a matter of months. It is difficult, at the height of the pandemic, to make recommendations for a future whose landscape we cannot yet divine. Nonetheless, a few things are clear.

The 2020 youth disconnection rate will spike.

Data on school enrollment and employment from the American Community Survey have a lag of roughly twelve to eighteen months. (That's why this report, released in 2020, features data from 2018.) Thus, we won't definitively know the impact of the pandemic on youth disconnection until late 2021. It is already apparent, however, that the ranks of disconnected youth will swell well beyond what we saw in the aftermath of the Great Recession, when 5.8 million young people were out of school and work.

First, unemployment has skyrocketed. Between March 15 and March 28 alone, 13.2 million people filed jobless claims, an all-time record,³⁸ and as of May 1, the novel coronavirus had cost more than 30 million Americans their jobs. At the time of this writing, the Congressional Budget Office predicted that the unemployment rate will soon exceed 15 percent—higher than during the Great Recession—and remain close to that until the end of 2021.³⁹ Less-sanguine economists at the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis have predicted that the unemployment rate could top 32 percent.⁴⁰ In times of high unemployment, young workers and less-educated workers are the hardest hit. They are also the least likely to hold jobs that can be conducted remotely, as they are often employed in food service or retail jobs. Current high school and college seniors will graduate into the worst economy since the Great Depression.

Second, school enrollment is likely to drop. Unlike during the Great Recession, when many young people waited out the poor job market in the classroom, the coming year will see ties to the educational system unravel. K–12 schools in all fifty states have moved to distance learning, and, as of April 27, at least forty-three states have said that their schools will remain shuttered through the end of the school year.⁴¹ Colleges and universities have almost universally moved their operations online through the end of the semester, and many are already planning for summer and fall sessions to be held remotely. Recent surveys suggest that four-year colleges and universities could lose 20 percent of their students in the fall.⁴²

Distance learning magnifies the effects of the vastly different home environments students experience. Some are able to work from their childhood bedrooms on personal computers with strong internet connections and parents able to lend a hand, while others live in crowded households without broadband where siblings and parents must share a single computer or make due with mobile

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devices. Just 61 percent of Latino households and 66 percent of black households have broadband internet, compared to 79 percent of white households.⁴³ Anecdotal evidence suggests that while students in affluent K–12 districts have been managing the demands of online learning, students in struggling districts have not. Low-income young people may lose valuable instruction time, fall further behind their peers, and risk repeating a grade, all of which make them more likely to drop out. If distance learning continues, districts and state governments lacking resources and guidance may resort to online or virtual school providers, which often have dismal performance records and receive little oversight. Evaluations of online charter schools—which on average show almost no academic growth in math scores after a year of instruction—speak to the overwhelming challenges inherent in moving the classroom into cyberspace.⁴⁴

In this environment, when even high-achieving students struggle to remain engaged, the already tenuous bonds between at-risk young people and school are far more likely to fray. In the absence of in-person encouragement and support, fewer high school students will transition to college or career and technical programs than in normal times, and many college students will withdraw from school at least temporarily if the fall 2020 semester goes virtual.

During and in the years following the Great Recession, the number of disconnected youth was close to six million; 14.7 percent, or about one in every seven young people, were neither working nor in school. Given the wide-ranging and catastrophic effects of the current crisis on both the economy and the educational system, we estimate that the number of disconnected youth will easily top six million and could swell to almost one-quarter of all young people, or nearly nine million teens and young adults.

Disconnected youth and their families will be hardest hit.

Disconnected young people hail disproportionately from low-income communities of color—communities that are nearly always most harmed and slowest to recover from disasters of all sorts.

Preliminary evidence shows that black people of all ages are disproportionately likely to die from novel coronavirus, meaning that the burden of illness, trauma, and grief will weigh heavily on black teens and young adults. In Louisiana, as of early April, 70 percent of those who have died were black, though black people make up just 32 percent of the state population; in Michigan, where 14 percent of the population is black, 40 percent of those who have died were black; and in Chicago, black people have died at six times the rate of white people.⁴⁵ Native American populations, whose young people experience the highest disconnection rate of the five major racial and ethnic groups, are particularly vulnerable to Covid-19 due to poverty, overcrowding, widespread lack of running water for handwashing, an underfunded health system, and a heavy burden of diseases like diabetes.

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Already-fragile household economies are being shattered. Family members are more likely to be low-wage service-sector workers, a group whose jobs are insecure, poorly paid, and lack benefits in the best of times and now face unprecedented job loss. Others have jobs that cannot be done from home and which require continual contact with people—home health aides, delivery workers, grocery checkout clerks, and cleaners—heightening their risk of infection. Basic survival needs are going unmet as food insecurity spikes, health systems are stretched beyond the breaking point, childcare is nonexistent, and community-based organizations' ability to provide services is hamstrung.

Disconnected young people who live on their own are particularly vulnerable yet are not a priority in relief packages passed so far. For instance, they are not eligible for direct payments or unemployment insurance since they were not in the workforce. Homeless youth are unable to shelter in place; they have no place. Living on the street or in shelters, they risk exposure and can't even engage in basic self-protection like handwashing with soap. Disabled people are particularly vulnerable, and disconnected young people are three times as likely as connected young people to be living with a disability. People living in institutions are likewise more vulnerable than the rest of the population, and disconnected youth are twenty times as likely as connected youth to be institutionalized.

Disconnected young people are more likely than the general population to be in contact with the criminal justice system, and jails and prisons are emerging as infection hot spots. As of April 8, the Cook County Jail was the largest known source of novel coronavirus infection in the United States, and over 1,300 cases confirmed cases have been tied to prisons and jails across the country.⁴⁶ People are crowded together cheek-by-jowl, the population disproportionately suffers underlying health conditions, protective gear is nonexistent, health care is poor, and even access to soap and water is not a given; for these reasons, Covid-19 is spreading like wildfire behind bars. Because of the lasting impact of tough sentencing laws, unnecessary bail and pretrial incarceration policies, and an overly punitive juvenile justice system, far too many young people are behind bars, and Covid-19 is turning jail time into a potential death sentence. Roughly 200,000 people enter and leave jails and prisons each week, a population churn that endangers inmates, correctional officers, and the communities into which people are released.⁴⁷ Releasing nonviolent offenders and ensuring that they have safe places to self-quarantine is vital.

We have enough money to solve youth disconnection.

The idea that money is scarce, that the United States lacks the resources required for all children—including poor ones—to flourish, has been unmasked as the cruel lie it is. In the space of just eight days, from March 19 to March 27, a divided Congress that agrees on next to nothing managed to pass the \$2 trillion Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act,⁴⁸ and more is on

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the way. This aid comes after years of cuts to food stamps, public health clinics, housing assistance, schools, and programs for at-risk young people—belts tightened during the recession and not loosened during the years of economic turnaround. While this crisis is unprecedented in its reach and suddenness, a day-in-day-out crisis has shaped the contours of life in poor communities for decades. In a country where rich corporations have been granted \$500 billion dollars in aid after a week’s deliberation, the assertion that universal health care, high-quality childcare, good schools for everyone, affordable college, and dignified employment are just too expensive is quite obviously false.

This report shines a spotlight on our most vulnerable communities.

The locales that make up Urban and Rural Opportunity Deserts were not only struggling in 2018, they are also the most vulnerable to the economic and social dislocation Covid-19 will wreak. Deaths, trauma, and jobs losses will fall thick and fast on young people and their families in communities where one in four youth were already out of school and work. Providing in the short term for the basic needs of these communities and committing over the long term to building an infrastructure of opportunity for young people in isolated and impoverished rural areas as well as in deeply disadvantaged urban neighborhoods must be our priority.

One size doesn’t fit all.

The data in this report show that disconnected young people share many challenges but differ in important ways. For instance, some girls and young women may need appealing and attainable educational and career options that make delaying motherhood worthwhile, as well as support like childcare, to reengage with educational programs, whereas others may need to improve their English-language skills so that they can find employment commensurate with their educational backgrounds. Reaching disconnected youth in Rural Opportunity Deserts will be a more formidable challenge than connecting out-of-school-and-work young people in Opportunity-Rich Urban Areas. Tailoring programs to meet the distinct needs of different groups of young people is more important than ever.

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The danger that current disconnected youth will be further left behind is very real.

During the Great Recession, an inaccurate image of disconnected young people took hold in the popular press: middle-class college graduates holed up in their parents’ basements, their nascent careers derailed by the economic collapse. In reality, while some college grads struggled to find jobs, the lion’s share of disconnected young people were still low-income, disproportionality minority youth who did not have college degrees. If, as a result of the coronavirus, the ranks of disconnected youth swell by two million people, or more, a similar

phenomenon may emerge. The out-of-school-and-work young people who reporters, policymakers, and other thought leaders and decision-makers know personally will more likely be “newly” disconnected youth—previously thriving high schoolers whose college plans were thrown into disarray, or successful college grads entering a jobless job market. What these young people need is for schools to reopen and the economy to get back on its feet; though their pain will be real and understandable, and though they may indeed suffer some long-term economic effects (research shows that young people who graduate college into a recessionary job market have depressed earnings for years to come),⁴⁹ they are well-positioned to resume their positive trajectory, though with delays and possibly lowered earnings for some time.

The young people struggling and off track prior to the coronavirus pandemic, on the other hand, face still bleaker prospects now and risk deep and lasting scars. Research shows that, compared to newly minted bachelor’s degree-holders, young people without college degrees face more negative effects on long-term health behaviors, mortality, and socioeconomic outcomes—from earnings to marriage rates—from entering the job market during a recession.⁵⁰ Attention and resources are likely to focus on the newly disconnected; they will be the young people policymakers can more easily target and assist, the squeaky wheel that will get the grease. Their distress (and that of their parents) in this sudden crisis is likely to unleash resources well beyond what was ever available to address the slow-moving, quotidian crisis of long-term disconnection. It is critical that the needs and voices of, to borrow the phrasing of William Julius Wilson, the “truly disconnected” are heard and listened to and that a fair share of the tsunami of resources let loose is channeled to them and their communities.