MEASUREOFAMERICA
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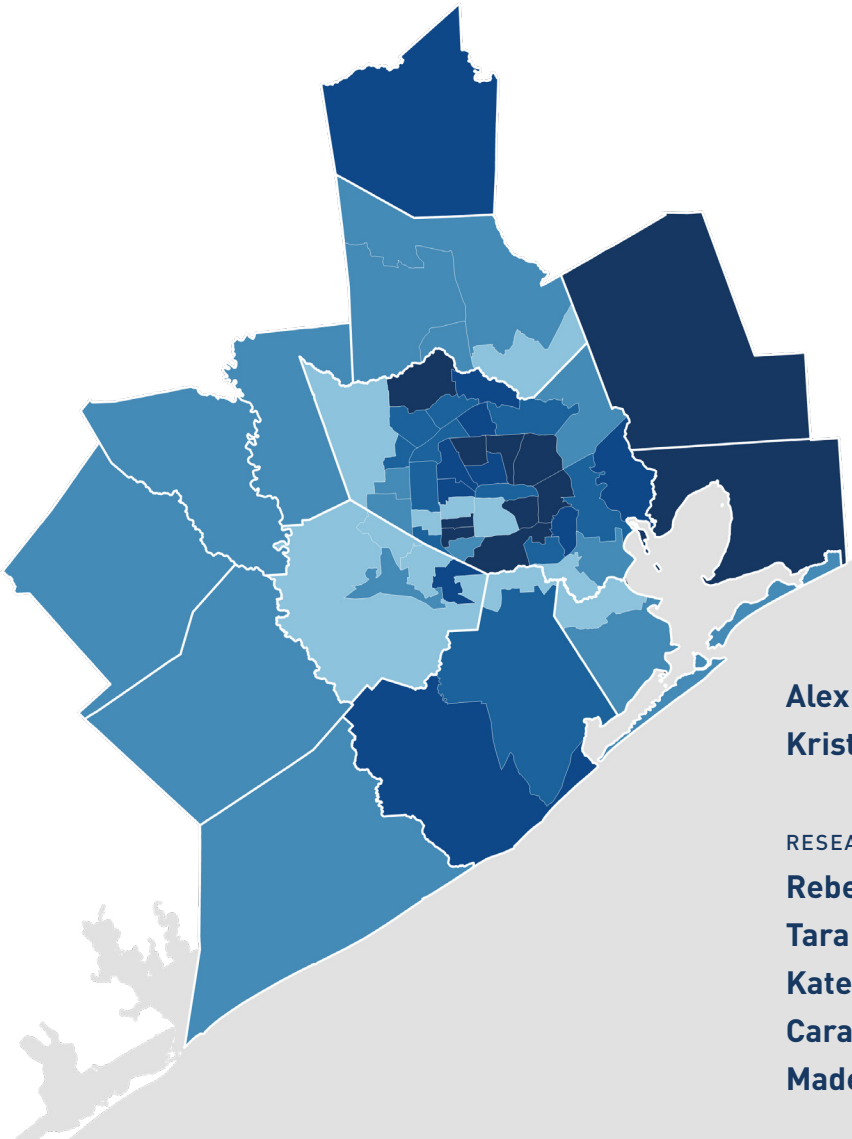
BUILDING BRIGHT FUTURES IN GREATER HOUSTON



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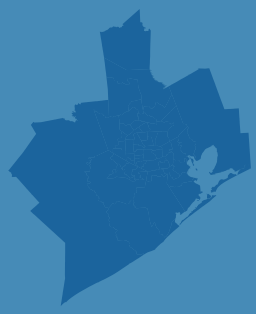
MEASURE OF AMERICA **YOUTH DISCONNECTION SERIES** 2025

124,500

OPPORTUNITY YOUTH & YOUNG ADULTS
16–24 YEARS OLD IN GREATER HOUSTON
OUT OF 935,400 TOTAL YOUTH

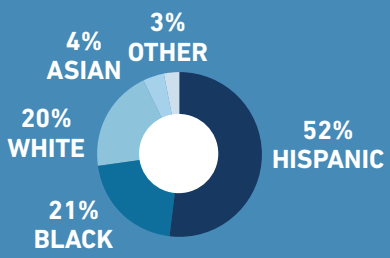


13.3%

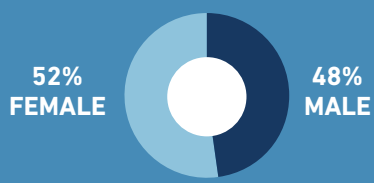
NEARLY 1 IN 7 YOUNG PEOPLE
NOT IN SCHOOL AND NOT WORKING

WHO ARE THEY?

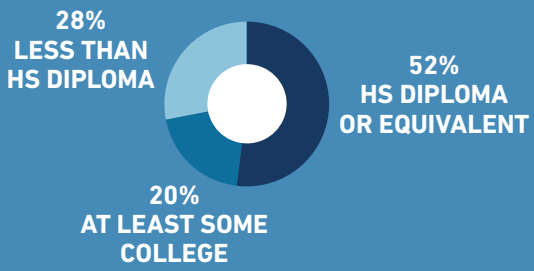
RACE/ETHNICITY



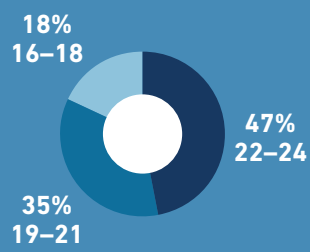
GENDER



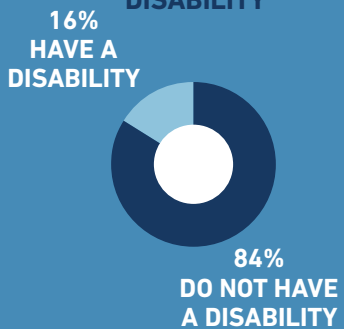
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT



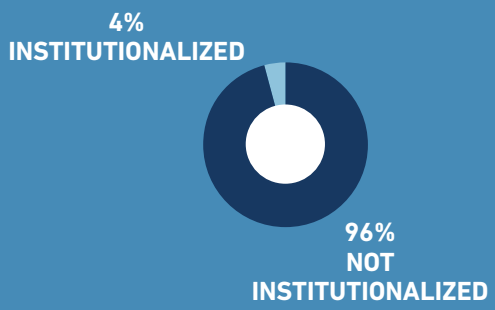
AGE GROUP



DISABILITY



INSTITUTIONALIZED



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During the course of our research, an advisory panel of public servants, advocates, scholars, and nonprofit leaders from across the 13 County Region of Greater Houston contributed their expertise to guide our work with vision and care. We would like to thank them for their time, energy, ideas, and invaluable support. Any mistakes or missteps are, of course, our own. These advisors included:

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thank you!

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MEASURE OF AMERICA

Measure of America is a project of the **Social Science Research Council**, a century-old independent nonprofit that mobilizes knowledge for the public good. Measure of America creates easy-to-use and methodologically sound tools for understanding well-being and opportunity in America. Through reports, interactive websites and apps, and custom-built dashboards, Measure of America works with partners to breathe life into numbers, using data to identify areas of need, pinpoint levers for change, and track progress over time.

The root of this work is the human development and capabilities approach, the brainchild of Harvard professor and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen. Human development is about improving people's well-being and expanding their choices and opportunities to live freely chosen lives of value. Disconnection from school and work during young adulthood hampers human development, closing off some of life's most rewarding and joyful paths and leading to a future of limited horizons and unrealized potential.

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PARTNERS

The **Greater Houston Opportunity Youth Collaborative** (GHOYC) brings together organizations, employers, and young adults to create education and career pathways for the next generation of workers that help bridge the incredible employment gap facing the Texas Gulf Coast region.

For 20 years, the **Alliance of Community Assistance Ministries, Inc.** (ACAM) has assisted families within the Greater Houston region during economic downturns, natural disasters, medical bankruptcy, and other community and family crises. ACAM is a 501(c)(3) management support organization that assists a network of partner organizations through high-impact collaboration, training, and management support services as they provide opportunities for families and individuals to meet and rise above their basic needs. ACAM provides the administrative and fiscal oversight of the GHOYC.

The William Stamps Farish Fund was formed in 1951 and supports education, health, and social service programs. Its geographic footprint includes Texas, Florida, Tennessee, New York, and Kentucky.

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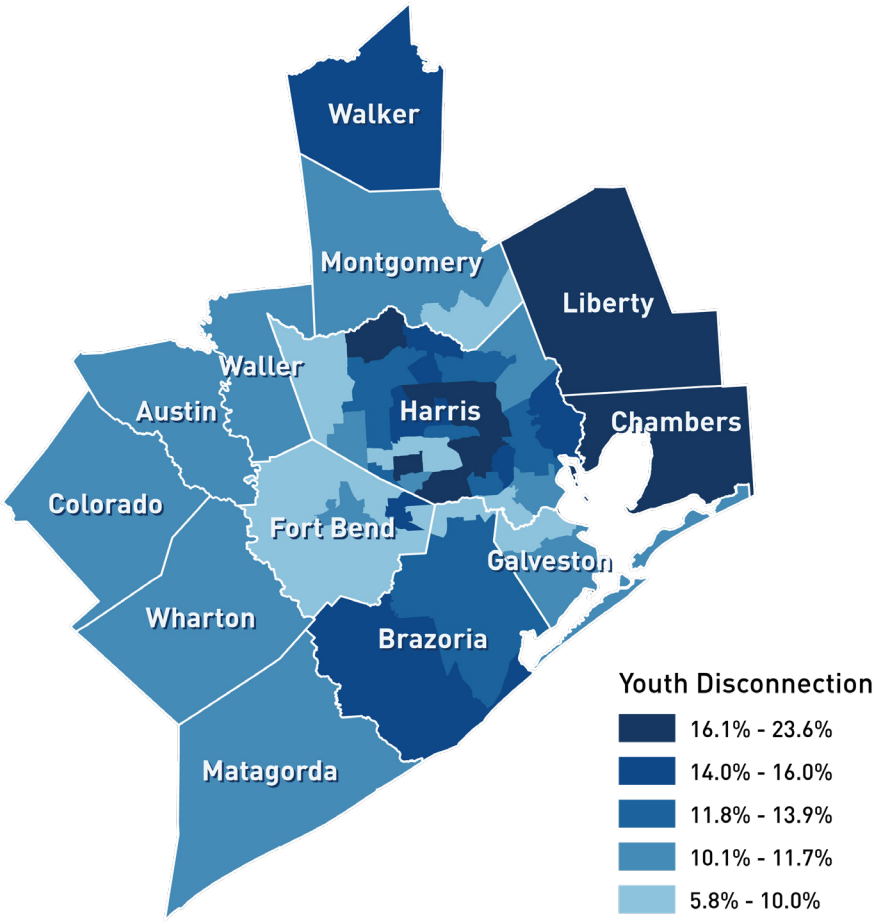
BUILDING BRIGHT FUTURES IN GREATER HOUSTON

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OPPORTUNITY YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS IN GREATER HOUSTON

The years of emerging adulthood are a critical time for young people to develop skills, earn credentials, and enjoy a variety of experiences that together set them on a path to a fulfilling life. For some youth, though, this path is rocky; it is marked by spells of separation from school and work, institutions that are fundamental to the transition to adulthood. The presence of many **disconnected youth**, or **opportunity youth and young adults** (OYYA)—people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither working nor in school—in a community indicates limited resources and opportunities and results in high costs to society and individuals.

This report focuses on the **Greater Houston area**, a 13-county region that encompasses the same counties as the Gulf Coast Workforce Board – Workforce Solutions: Austin, Brazoria, Chambers, Colorado, Fort Bend, Galveston, Harris, Liberty, Matagorda, Montgomery, Walker, Waller, and Wharton. Throughout this report, "Greater Houston" and "13 County Region" are used interchangeably.



Houston young person

In Greater Houston, **13.3 percent of youth and young adults ages 16 to 24 are not in school and not working**. This 13.3 percent disconnection rate is 2.4 percentage points higher than the national rate (10.9 percent) and higher than the rate in Texas as a whole (12.5 percent). In Houston, this translates to roughly **124,500 young people** cut off from crucial pathways to a fulfilling life. Of the top 25 most populous metropolitan areas in the United States, the Greater Houston area has the highest disconnection rate. Even though job growth in the Houston metro area is higher than in most other metro areas, this rising economic tide isn't lifting all boats—young people in the Houston area are less connected to work and school compared with other large, diverse, dynamic metropolitan areas. Among this same group of 25 large metro areas, only Houston and San Antonio have lagged far behind the rest of the country in improving opportunity for young people since the Great Recession (when youth disconnection peaked). The youth disconnection rate in the United States as a whole has improved by 23 percent since 2012, whereas Greater Houston has improved by 6 percent.

Greater Houston has the highest disconnection rate of the 25 largest metro areas in America.

One out of every ten opportunity youth and young adults in the United States live in Texas; **one out of every four opportunity youth in Texas live in the Greater Houston area**. Understanding, reconnecting, and investing in this population is important and a significant lever that can be pulled to drive job growth, educational attainment, and reduced poverty in the region for generations to come. These young adults, the vast majority of whom have become disconnected from work and school through no fault of their own, have tremendous promise, potential, and drive to succeed that can be unlocked, benefiting their communities, families, careers, and more. These disconnected young people may be looking for a job, they may be caring for children or other family members, they may be discouraged workers who don't know how to get back into the labor market or the educational pipeline, or they may be doing something else.

Girls and young women in Greater Houston are more likely to be disconnected than boys and young men, 14.2 percent versus 12.5 percent, a trend in evidence since 2009 and interrupted only by a spike in male disconnection in 2020. Though the gap has narrowed since 2009, it remains noteworthy because it runs counter to the situation in the United States overall, where the female rate has long been lower than the male rate.

In Greater Houston, the disconnection rate for Black youth, 16.0 percent, is the highest among the metro area's major racial and ethnic groups. The disconnection rate for Hispanic young adults is 14.4 percent, and the rate for white youth is 10.9 percent. Asian youth in Greater Houston have the lowest disconnection rate, 7.1 percent. The population size of these groups differs; it's important to note that **more than one out of four opportunity youth and young adults in the Greater Houston area are Hispanic young women (33,000)**. There are 27,000 Hispanic boys and young men who are not in school and not working, as well as 26,200 white young people, 25,900 Black young people, 4,200 Asian young people, and 3,200 young people who are some other race.

Nearly one in four of the area's youth living in poverty are disconnected (24.0 percent), compared to 10.8 percent of youth in the region not living in poverty.

More than a quarter (27.8 percent) of all youth with a disability in Greater Houston are disconnected: 15,900 young people. The share of young adults with a disability has risen dramatically since Covid-19, as has the share of young adults living with clinical depression or anxiety (see **PAGE 32**).

Opportunity youth and young adults in Greater Houston tend to have a tenuous attachment to the labor market. Slightly over half, 50.7 percent, of opportunity youth and young adults have not worked in the past five years, and seven out of ten are not actively looking for work: 85,000 young adults. **An unusually high share of all young people in Greater Houston haven't worked in the last five years**: 35.8 percent of youth and young adults in Houston have never worked or last worked more than five years ago, compared to 32.4 percent in Texas and 26.6 percent in the United States as a whole.

Young mothers ages 16 to 24 face significantly higher rates of disconnection (41.7 percent) compared to women without children (10.8 percent), highlighting the unique challenges of balancing parenthood with education and employment. Compared to the United States overall, mothers are overrepresented in the opportunity youth population in Houston. The highest disconnection rate is found among white mothers (48.2 percent, or 3,400 mothers), followed by Hispanic mothers (45.2 percent, or 11,200 mothers). Black mothers have the lowest rate of disconnection, 26.3 percent, or 2,000 mothers.

Regional variations within Greater Houston are stark. The highest youth disconnection rate, 23.6 percent, can be found in the north of Houston—the East Aldine and Eastex-Jensen Area. Aldine is a Harris County suburb where over 60 percent of homes sustained damage from Hurricane Harvey in 2017.[1] The lowest youth disconnection rate, 5.8 percent, is in the area that includes Washington/Memorial Park, Montrose, the Astrodome, and Braeswood and which is also home to the University of Houston, Rice University, and the Texas Medical Center. Immediately to the east of this area, some of the highest disconnection rates in the region can be found in the Downtown, Second Ward, and Pecan Park area; the area north of the Gulf Freeway and south of I-10 has a disconnection rate of 18.8 percent, and also includes Eastwood, Magnolia Park, Lawndale/Wayside, and the southern sections of the Fifth Ward and Denver Harbor/Port Houston. This pattern exists across America—neighborhoods right next to each other can have dramatically different levels of access to opportunity.

In Greater Houston, youth disconnection is not just an urban, suburban, or rural problem.

In the 13 County Region, youth disconnection is not primarily an urban, suburban, or rural problem. Neighborhoods in each category differ in the level of opportunity available to the young adults who live there. The share of young adults who are out of school and out of work in more rural areas ranges from 6.5 percent (Western and Southern Fort Bend County) to 20.9 percent (Liberty and Chambers Counties). In medium-density areas, neighborhood-level youth disconnection rates run from 6.5 percent (Sugar Land and Stafford in Northeast Fort Bend County) to

23.6 percent (East Aldine and Eastex-Jensen Area). In densely populated Greater Houston, youth disconnection varies from 5.8 percent (the Washington/Memorial Park, Montrose, Astrodome, & Braeswood area mentioned above, including University Place, and the Texas Medical Center), to 20.0 percent (Westwood, Braeburn, and Meyerland).

Young people who remain connected to work and school earn, on average, $38,400 more each year in their thirties.

Houston stands to gain a great deal from addressing youth disconnection—first and foremost, increased opportunity, health, and well-being for more of its young people, a worthy end in itself. In addition, reducing the youth disconnection rate would dramatically boost the region's economy. Measure of America research shows that young adults who worked or were in school throughout their teens and early 20s earn an average of $38,400 more per year by the time they reach their 30s than their peers who had been disconnected during emerging adulthood. Using a conservative estimate, this additional income translates to an **additional $26,200 of annual discretionary income** for youth who remain connected through their transition to adulthood. If the disconnection rate in Houston was reduced by just one-third, to 8.9 percent—in other words, if one in three opportunity youth and young adults in the 13-county Greater Houston region were connected to work or school—these 41,500 individuals, in their 30s, would have an **additional $1.1 billion in discretionary income each year**. A sizeable portion of these funds would flow to the local economy, generating spillover economic activity—for local businesses, employers, and families—that would amplify the economic benefit of this already substantial cash injection. Additionally, higher income leads to higher tax revenue: adults who remain connected through their teens and early 20s contribute, on average, **an additional $1,770 each year in Texas sales and use taxes**. If the disconnection rate in the Greater Houston area was reduced by one-third (41,500 connected), **Texas tax receipts would increase by at least $73.5 million each year**.

On a purely economic basis, the return on investment for reconnecting opportunity youth is substantial. Setting and achieving realistic goals for youth connection that other large, diverse, complex metropolitan and surrounding areas have achieved would benefit local communities, businesses, and governments. **Investment in opportunity youth and young adults is an investment that pays dividends**: individuals earn more and contribute more in taxes that flow to other community members; employers have a broader, more skilled workforce to hire from; and intergenerational and community-level patterns of persistent poverty are alleviated. Ensuring that all young adults have the opportunities they need to build a freely chosen, flourishing career and home life benefits communities as a whole. When young people do well, we all benefit.

RECOMMENDATIONS

What will it take to realize these gains? The following areas are priorities:

Direct resources and attention toward the groups and places with the highest disconnection rates. Of the groups addressed in this study, 21- to 24-year-olds who last worked more than five years ago or never (53.4 percent, 30,100 individuals), young mothers (41.7 percent, 17,000 individuals), and 21- to 24-year-olds with less than a high school diploma (36.0 percent, 14,400 individuals) had some of the highest disconnection rates—more than triple the region-wide average. In addition, several geographic areas have an unusually high share of young people who are neither working nor in school: the East Aldine and Eastex-Jensen Area; Aldine West, Acres Home, and Klein Far South; Liberty and Chambers Counties; Westwood, Braeburn, and Meyerland. In each of these places, the youth disconnection rate is 20 percent or more. Many neighborhoods would benefit from additional investment, but these stand out. **Greater investment in community-level support organizations** are needed in these neighborhoods and throughout Greater Houston in order to reach young people who drop out of school and are not well served by standard institutional supports designed to keep young adults on track.

Young people need programs and support in high school and in their communities that help them figure out and take their next step.

Connect youth and young adults to the labor market. Across Greater Houston, 50.7 percent of opportunity youth and young adults have not worked in the past five years: 60,500 young people. The barrier to entry for jobs that pay well enough to support a family is higher than it has been in the past. To address this, expanding targeted employment and training programs is key, especially for those who are on the older end of the 16- to 24-year-old range, without high school diplomas, and without recent work experience. Such initiatives should focus on providing practical work experience (such as through expanded apprenticeship and work-based learning programs), bridging educational gaps, and revitalizing hope in discouraged job-seekers.

Prioritize high school completion. In Greater Houston, 10.0 percent of adults ages 22 to 24 lack a high school diploma, in contrast to 8.0 percent statewide. Young adults who do not complete high school face substantial challenges. Initiatives that enable schools to identify and address early warning signs of dropout, like high rates of absenteeism; encourage and support struggling students to make it to the finish line of high school graduation; and provide easy-to-access chances to finish high school following periods of disconnection are crucial.

Plan around what comes after high school. A high school degree is necessary but often not sufficient: around 25 percent of youth in Houston with a high school diploma are disconnected. Young people need programs and support in high school and in their communities that help them figure out and take their next step, whether that means vocational training, volunteer or employment opportunities to build professional skills, or college application and financial aid guidance and support. Strong evidence shows that providing community college students with a wide range of comprehensive supports—such as counseling, tutoring, and financial assistance—can increase enrollment and improve graduation rates.

Maintain a focus on youth in poverty. The intertwined nature of poverty and disconnection is evident, and strategies to mitigate poverty and its ensuing challenges can minimize disconnection. Organizations can reach young people when they or their families access other programs designed to alleviate poverty.

Support youth with disabilities. With the proper support, many young people with disabilities can succeed in school and have fulfilling careers. The increase in youth with disabilities, especially cognitive disabilities, following Covid-19 makes it more essential than ever to ensure that the needs of this group are not overlooked. Keeping the "whole person" in mind when designing interventions is essential—mental health is a key component of success in work and school and is often overlooked. More investment in mental health supports for young people in school—and those who have left the educational pipeline—is needed.

Support programs and policies that enable young mothers to pursue their educational and career goals. Engaging with disconnected mothers to understand their needs—whether it's evening courses, affordable child care, transportation, or adaptable working hours—is vital. To support their employment, special emphasis should be placed on preparing young women for better-paying jobs—which are often in male-dominated fields—and ensuring that they have pathways to industries that supply a greater share of jobs that don't require advanced degrees, such as the construction, manufacturing, and transportation and warehousing industries. Well-paid "middle-skill" jobs—jobs that require substantial training whether on-the-job, through a certification/apprenticeship process, or via an associate degree—are overwhelmingly held by young men, not young women. Industry gender balances are not set in stone; for instance, women once dominated the field of computer programming and comprised a substantial share of manufacturing employment during World War II and the Industrial Revolution.

Reduce disconnection risk by investing in children and families. Disconnection doesn't happen overnight; unless precipitated by a sudden crisis, such as the onset of a severe mental illness or a death in the family, the process of becoming disconnected from school and work tends to be years in the making. Reducing disconnection requires building strong and positive links between children and their families and the education system from the earliest years. Children growing up in disadvantaged circumstances need schools with the expertise and resources to provide excellent 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 like failing a core academic subject, repeating a grade, or missing more than 10 percent of school days.

Affordable childcare, flexible work schedules, promising career paths, and education that can coexist with parenting responsibilities are crucial to reducing disconnection among young mothers.

"I do want to go back [to school] but right now I don't think I'm in quite a good place financially or mentally to be able to handle a job, bills, and going back to school all over again. My junior year, I had to grow up very fast due to my family, and I was already doing that—paying bills, in 11th grade....But after all of this is over, and I'm stable, definitely going to college and university."

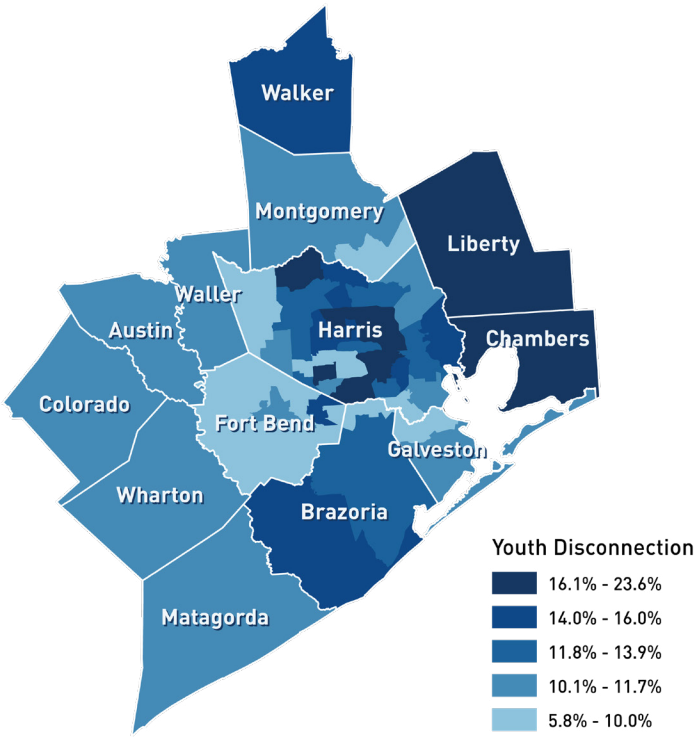
Houston young person

INTRODUCTION

The youth disconnection rate—the share of young people ages 16 to 24 who are neither working nor in school—is a **strong indicator of a community's resources and a telling gauge of its residents' access to opportunity**. During their teens and early 20s, young people develop many of the capabilities required to live flourishing lives: they gain knowledge and earn credentials, develop social skills and networks, come to understand their strengths and preferences, and learn to handle stressful events and regulate their emotions, to name just a few. Through their experiences in the classroom, through clubs and student organizations, on the sports field, during internships and first jobs, and in community or service groups, they have opportunities to develop a sense of mastery and agency as well as to make mistakes they can learn from in a supportive environment. At school and on the job, connected young people build relationships with encouraging adults whose job it is to help them imagine their futures, get their minds around the many different routes to rewarding and well-paid careers, set short- and long-term goals, and lay the groundwork to realize them; they have a chance to learn about the world and support to envision their potential role in it.

During their teens and early 20s, young people develop many of the capabilities required to live flourishing lives.

But what about young people who leave high school before graduation, are unable to transition from high school to college or workforce and technical education programs, or struggle to find or hold on to jobs? Out-of-school, out-of-



work youth, who are disproportionately Black and Hispanic and tend to live in low-income communities, also have dreams and aspirations but have far less support to make them a reality.

This report focuses on the **Greater Houston area**, a 13-county region encompassing the same counties as the Gulf Coast Workforce Board: Harris, Fort Bend, Montgomery, Galveston, Brazoria, Waller, Austin, Chambers, Colorado, Liberty, Matagorda, Walker, and Wharton. In this report, "13 County Region" and "Greater Houston" are used interchangeably.

Disconnected youth are young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither working nor in school. Here in the United States, organizations that work with this population began to use the term **"opportunity youth"** in 2012. In 2016, the Rice University Kinder Institute for Urban Research released *Houston's Opportunity: Reconnecting Disengaged Youth to Strengthen Houston's Economy,* and most frequently used the term **"opportunity youth and young adults,"** or OYYA.[2] Within this report, the "disconnected youth" and "opportunity youth" terms are used interchangeably; they mean the same thing and have the same definition. The definition (16- to 24-year-olds not in school and not working) and the data source (the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey) is consistent across these terms. Measure of America has been using a consistent definition and methodology for calculating disconnection since 2012; this same definition and methodology were used for the Kinder Institute's *Houston's Opportunity* report (see APPENDIX C for more info). Some other research in this space defines youth as "connected" if they do not have a job but are looking for one; Measure of America does not.

Disconnected youth, or opportunity youth and young adults, are teens and young adults ages 16 to 24 who are neither in school nor working.

In the Greater Houston area, **13.3 percent of adults ages 16 to 24 are not in school and not working: 124,500 opportunity youth and young adults.** This 13.3 percent disconnection rate is 2.4 percentage points higher than the national rate (10.9 percent) and higher than the rate in Texas as a whole (12.5 percent). Unlike their connected peers, who tend to have knowledgeable guides to help them navigate the transition to adulthood, these young people often struggle to see a way forward and connect with the resources available to them.

Unfortunately, Covid-19's harmful and potentially persistent effects made connection more difficult for Houston's out-of-school, out-of-work young people. The pandemic reversed about a decade of progress in reducing youth disconnection. In both Houston and Texas as a whole, the youth disconnection rate had been steadily dropping for several years from peaks in 2009 and 2010 (see **FIGURE 3** on **PAGE 20**). Covid-19's arrival overturned the trend, leaving Greater Houston with a disconnection rate of 14.5 percent in 2021—on par with the 2011 level of 14.5 percent, or one in seven young adults out of school and out of work (for more change-over-time analysis, see **PAGE 20**). Thankfully, a strong labor market has propelled a relatively rapid recovery in the disconnection rate both nationally and in Houston relative to the peak of the pandemic. **However, disconnection rates in both Greater Houston and Texas remain above their prepandemic levels, without the sharper recovery seen nationally, in Dallas, and dozens of other large metro areas.**

Though Covid-19 affected everyone, its burden fell disproportionately on low-income communities of color, which are also disproportionately home to the highest rates of youth disconnection. And there are reasons to be concerned about the future: recent research by the Education Recovery Scorecard project showed that by 2022, the typical student in the country's poorest school districts had lost three-quarters of a year in math learning, twice the decline seen in the richest districts, and also lost more ground in reading than their more affluent peers; these sharp losses worsened the wide and long-standing gap in outcomes between rich and poor districts and, if not successfully addressed, will result in higher rates of high school dropout, fewer students transitioning from high school to postsecondary education, and fewer entry-level workers with the skills needed for many jobs in the coming years. **In the 13 County Region, several school districts lost roughly one full grade level in math.** Without intervention, this will likely lead to growing numbers of opportunity youth and young adults in the future. A handful of other districts gained ground, and most districts were close to the Texas average of losing a half grade level in math from 2019 to 2022. (You can find your school district here; data for 2023 were not available at the time of publication.)

Increasing numbers of young people who are neither working nor in school means more adults whose long-term well-being and economic security are at risk. Using data from the gold-standard longitudinal study that has run since 1968, the Panel Survey of Income Dynamics, Measure of America determined that by the time they reach their 30s, **people who worked or were in school throughout their teens and early 20s earn $38,400 more per year and are 45 percent more likely to own a home, 42 percent more likely to be employed, and 52 percent more likely to report excellent or good health than those who had been disconnected as young people.**[3] Research shows that youth disconnection is associated with lower levels of educational attainment, higher rates of substance use, worse health, less stable relationships, and more criminal activity. For young people who are already parents, the chances that their children will grow up in poverty increase with disconnection.[4] Early successes, caring mentors, well-resourced institutions, and lucky breaks can set a young person on the path to a flourishing adulthood; closed doors, adverse events, underinvestment, and limited connections can block off a host of rewarding and joyful paths, leading to a future of limited horizons and unrealized potential.

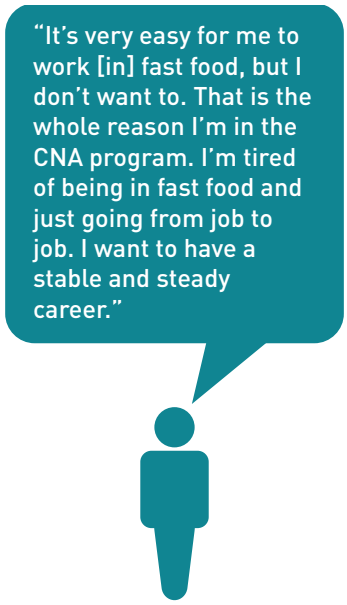
Early successes, caring mentors, well-resourced institutions, and lucky breaks can set a young person on the path to a flourishing adulthood.

On a more hopeful note, the pandemic underscored that both physical infrastructure like broadband internet and public transportation as well as social infrastructure like affordable childcare, health benefits, and medical leave are essential to the functioning of modern life, helping to make the case and generate support for long-overdue investments in these necessities. **Using the tough, painful lessons of Covid-19 to inform the creation of an infrastructure of opportunity for and greater investment in all Houston's young people would allow some good to emerge from a terrible situation.** In addition, Houston offers many advantages to young people just starting out compared to other large metro

areas. For instance, the cost of living in Houston is one of the lowest among the country's most populous metro areas (though the national spike in living costs has made every place, Houston included, more expensive than in recent years).[5] Houston is also among the top metro areas for small-business job growth, a source of employment for the city's large and fast-growing youth population.[6] In addition, the Inflation Reduction Act will provide a huge influx of funds for clean-energy projects over the next several years, which could create a host of new green jobs for today's young people in a state that is already a leader not just in oil and gas but also in wind and solar.[7] **And Houston has proven capable of addressing large, seemingly intractable problems before**; for example, it has reduced homelessness by 64 percent through public policy, strategic use of federal funding, and the coordinated efforts of over 100 nonprofit organizations under the umbrella of The Way Home, offering a model to other large metro areas.[8] Such a coordinated, multisectoral approach to the issues holding back Greater Houston's out-of-school, out-of-work young people could yield similar success. There's evidence that a similar coordinated effort to help opportunity youth and young adults in Phoenix led to significant metro-area-wide improvement in connection to work and school for young adults (see **PAGE 24**).

All of society loses out when so many teens and young adults are not able to realize their potential. The earnings of adults are the lifeblood of a local economy; those who earn more can afford to spend more of their paychecks on nonessentials—what is known as discretionary income—including local consumer goods and services. Discretionary income is what is left over from take-home pay after essential expenses are paid. Measure of America calculated discretionary income by subtracting federal and Texas taxes, Houston housing costs, and food costs from the average income of previously connected and disconnected youth at the 13- to 15-year mark. As mentioned earlier, Measure of America research shows that young adults who worked or were in school throughout their teens and early 20s earn an average of $38,400 more per year.

Using a conservative estimate (see **PAGE 83** for estimation methodology), this increased income translates to an **additional $26,200 of annual discretionary income** for youth who remain connected through their transition to adulthood. If the disconnection rate in Houston was reduced by just one-third, to 8.9 percent—in other words, if one in three opportunity youth and young adults in the 13-county Greater Houston region were connected to work and school—these individuals, in their 30s, would have an **additional $1.1 billion in discretionary income each year**. A sizeable portion of these funds would flow to the local economy, generating spillover economic activity—for local businesses, employers, and families—that would amplify the economic benefit of this already substantial cash injection. Additionally, higher income leads to higher tax revenue: adults who remain connected through their teens and early 20s contribute, on average, **an additional $1,770 each year in Texas sales and use taxes**. If the disconnection rate in the Greater Houston area was reduced by a third, **Texas tax receipts would increase by**



Houston young person

at least $73.5 million each year. This estimation doesn't include taxes that would flow to local municipalities. On a purely economic basis, the return on investment for reconnecting opportunity youth—to set and achieve measurable goals that other large, diverse, complex metropolitan and surrounding areas have achieved—is substantial, and accrues to local communities, businesses, and governments. Investment in opportunity youth and young adults is an investment in the future, with substantial payoff.

The purpose of this report is to make clear the reality of youth disconnection in Greater Houston and to provide actionable recommendations to help marshal and target resources to connect youth and young adults to jobs and school. Addressing disconnection requires numerous stakeholders working in concert on multiple fronts. Learning from what has worked in other places is important, but addressing disconnection also requires learning about a region's and population's particular challenges; analysis of local data can highlight priority areas and help set common goals that guide collective work at the community level.

BOX 1 How Are Disconnected or Opportunity Youth and Young Adults Defined?

Measure of America (MOA) defines disconnected youth as teens and young adults ages 16 to 24 who are neither in school nor working. This is the definition that MOA has used in its data calculations and analysis on youth disconnection since its first report on the topic, *One in Seven*, published in 2012. It's also the foundation for most other youth disconnection estimates. MOA's data come from the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS). **The ACS gathers data from a representative sample of millions of American households each calendar year; no other survey has its depth and breadth.** The survey's main advantage over other sources is that its sample size is extremely large, making it possible to calculate youth disconnection rates nationally and by state, as well as for counties, metro areas, and even smaller geographic areas. The ACS also allows for disaggregation by race and ethnicity and by gender for geographies with sufficiently large populations.

TERMS	US Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS) Definitions
In School	Part-time or full-time students who have attended school or college in the past three months. Students on summer vacation are counted as enrolled in school.
Working	Those who had any full- or part-time work in the previous week. This includes gig work, self-employment, and unpaid work on a farm or in a family business. Childrearing and other domestic or family work is not considered employment. Looking for a job is not considered employment.
Not Working	Unemployed in previous week or not in labor force and not looking for a job.

BOX 2 What Are the Limitations of American Community Survey Data?

Large administrative surveys such as the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) are both irreplaceable and imperfect. For instance, in this report we are not able to provide youth disconnection rates for young people who are Native American because their population falls below the number required for reliable calculations; we are not able to provide rates for LGBTQ young people because survey respondents don't have a chance to identify themselves this way on the ACS; and we can't provide rates for nonbinary people because male and female are the only categories offered. **Despite its shortcomings, the ACS is the best data source available for detailed, local-level population data on a wide array of social and economic indicators, as well as for detailed change-over-time analysis** of the same population: in this case, disconnected youth.

All data are flawed and imperfect, whether quantitative or qualitative. The alternative to imperfect data is no data. To address the issue of imperfect data, we convene a diverse group of local advisors to guide us for every place-based report we publish to ensure that community members themselves are involved in the process and can help us understand and reflect in our work realities that are invisible in the statistics. Only by understanding today's reality—however imperfectly—is it possible to act to achieve a better tomorrow. Data on specific groups of young people help stakeholders—among them policymakers, philanthropists, community leaders, and opportunity youth themselves—understand the nature and scope of challenges, tailor programs to specific needs, target resources, and track change over time.

For instance, the ACS has limitations where foster children are concerned. Children and young adults in foster care often face more barriers than their peers when transitioning to adulthood. Over the last decade, the Census has become better at surveying foster children. Comparing Census estimates with the most authoritative national dataset on youth in foster care, AFCARS, shows that 77 percent of foster children in the United States were counted by the Census in 2021, an improvement from 2008, when the Census successfully counted only half of foster children.[9] The Census may still be undercounting disconnected children in foster care, which would slightly artificially lower the youth disconnection rate; on the other hand, recent research has found that children in foster care are actually less at risk of poverty than other youth due to the protective effects of the household receiving regular foster care payments.[10] It is very difficult to blend foster care datasets with other datasets in order to reliable calculate the opportunity youth population in the foster system.

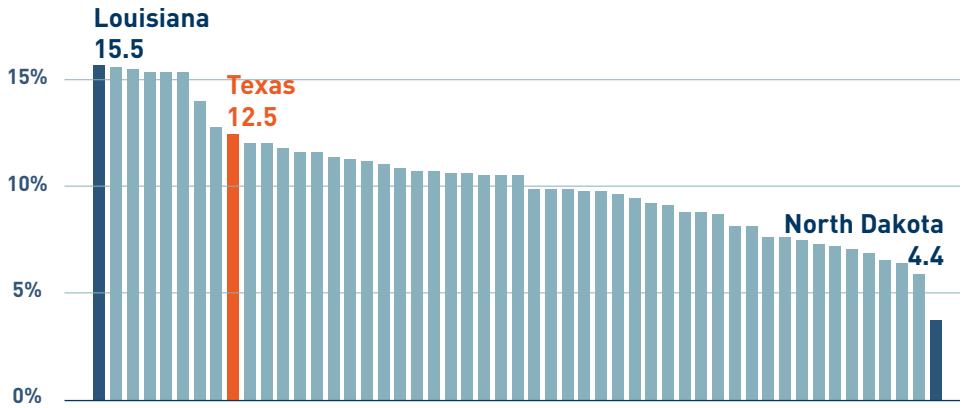
All this is to say: ACS data cannot paint the full picture of the range of struggles and opportunities of any given community. That is why Measure of America takes a both/and approach, both using large datasets and seeking to fill in the gaps with locally collected data, other secondary sources and research, and interviews with local opportunity youth and young adults.

GREATER HOUSTON IN CONTEXT

In the Greater Houston area, **13.3 percent of adults ages 16 to 24 are not in school and not working**. This disconnection rate is 2.4 percentage points higher than the national rate (10.9 percent) and slightly higher than the rate in Texas as a whole (12.5 percent). In Houston, this translates to roughly **124,500 young people** cut off from crucial pathways to a fulfilling life. In this section, data for the Greater Houston 13-county region and the geographies we compare it to are from 2022, the year of the most recent available American Community Survey. In subsequent sections that cover characteristics of opportunity youth and young adults, five-year pooled estimates are used for Houston as a whole and for neighborhood-by-neighborhood analysis. These five-year rollups allow for greater reliability for smaller populations, whether geographic (Houston subregions) or demographic (racial and ethnic groups, mothers, young people with a disability, and so on).

In the Greater Houston area, 13.3 percent of adults ages 16 to 24 are not in school and not working. This translates to roughly 124,500 young people cut off from crucial pathways to a fulfilling life.

FIGURE 1 TEXAS IN STATE CONTEXT



Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2022.

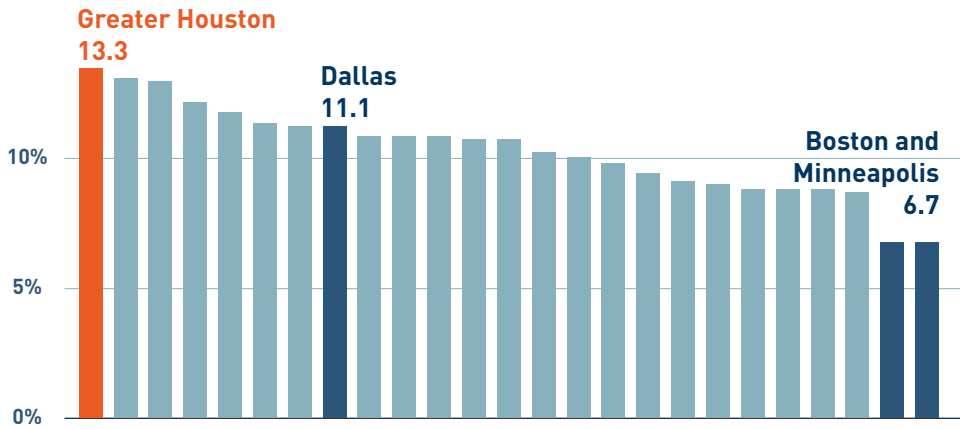
Youth disconnection rates vary widely in communities across the United States; state rates range from 4.4 percent in North Dakota to 15.5 percent in Louisiana. Texas, with a disconnection rate of 12.5 percent, ranks forty-third among the fifty states and Washington, DC. Among large states, Texas has the highest disconnection rate; Florida, California, and New York have average or higher-than-average disconnection rates of 11.3, 11.2, and 10.9 percent, respectively.

Among the country's 99 most populous metro areas with reliable youth disconnection rates, Greater Houston ranks 89th. Other Texas metro areas among this group of 99 include Austin-Round Rock-San Marcos (8.8 percent); Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington (11.1 percent); El Paso (11.6 percent); San Antonio-New Braunfels (12.9 percent); and McAllen-Edinburg-Mission (18.5 percent). Greater Houston stands out when compared to other large metro areas—among the 10 largest

metros in America (which all have populations of over 5 million inhabitants), the 13 County Region has by far the highest disconnection rate, 13.3 percent, followed by Miami at 12.0 percent and Dallas and Los Angeles at 11.1 percent. Philadelphia, by contrast, has an 8.7 percent disconnection rate. Expanding the lens to the top 25 largest metro areas (any metro area with over 2.5 million inhabitants) yields a similar pattern: Greater Houston has the highest disconnection rate of any of the top 25 largest metros. The disconnection rate for the Houston nine-county region (following the Office of Management and Budget definition of the Houston metropolitan area) is also 13.3 percent in 2022—the addition of Colorado, Matagorda, Walker, and Wharton Counties to align with the Gulf Coast Workforce Board geography doesn't detectably affect the topline disconnection rate for the Houston-Galveston region.

The Greater Houston area has by far the highest disconnection rate for any metro area over 5 million residents, as well as the highest disconnection rate for any metro area with more than 2.5 million residents.

FIGURE 2 AMONG THE 25 LARGEST METRO AREAS IN THE US, GREATER HOUSTON HAS THE HIGHEST DISCONNECTION RATE



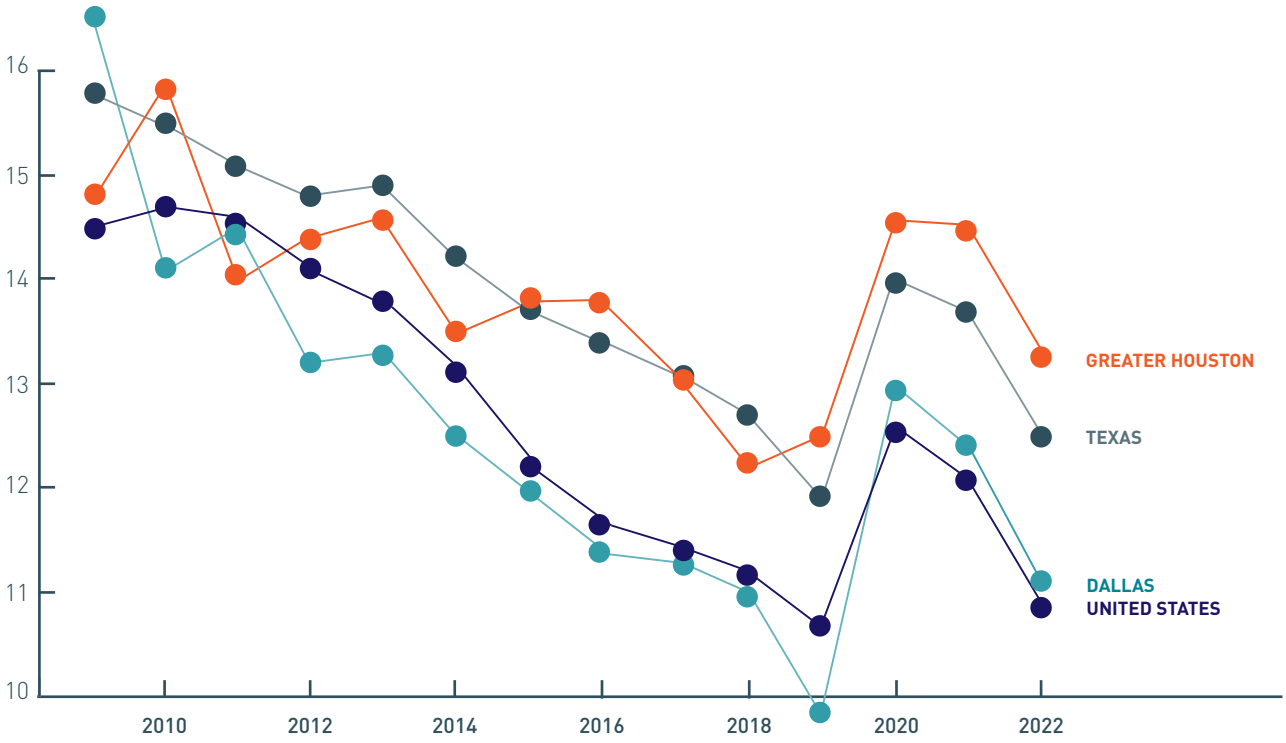
Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2022.

CHANGE OVER TIME

In the aftermath of the Great Recession, the youth disconnection rate in Greater Houston decreased at a slower pace than in the Dallas–Fort Worth metro area, the United States as a whole, and all other 25 large metro areas in America. In 2011, Dallas, Houston, and the United States all shared similar disconnection rates of 14.5 percent for Dallas and Houston and 14.6 percent for the country as a whole. Since then, the trajectories for young adults in these regions have diverged substantially. The Greater Houston disconnection rate closely tracked the Texas rate for some time; however, starting in 2019 and continuing since, the Houston disconnection rate has been slightly higher than the Texas rate. Furthermore, the gap between Greater Houston and Texas as a whole is increasing—a disproportionately large share of young Houstonians are cut off from the opportunities that other Texans can pursue. The gap in disconnection rates between the United States and Greater Houston stands at 2.4 percentage points, also the widest it has been in this analysis, despite the dynamism of the economy and jobs growth in Texas and Greater Houston. Now, nearly one in seven young adults in Greater Houston are not in school and not working. Only one in nine Dallas young adults are out of school and out of work.

A disproportionately large share of young Houstonians are cut off from the opportunities that other Texans can pursue.

FIGURE 3 YOUTH DISCONNECTION RATE IN GREATER HOUSTON, 2009–2022 (%)

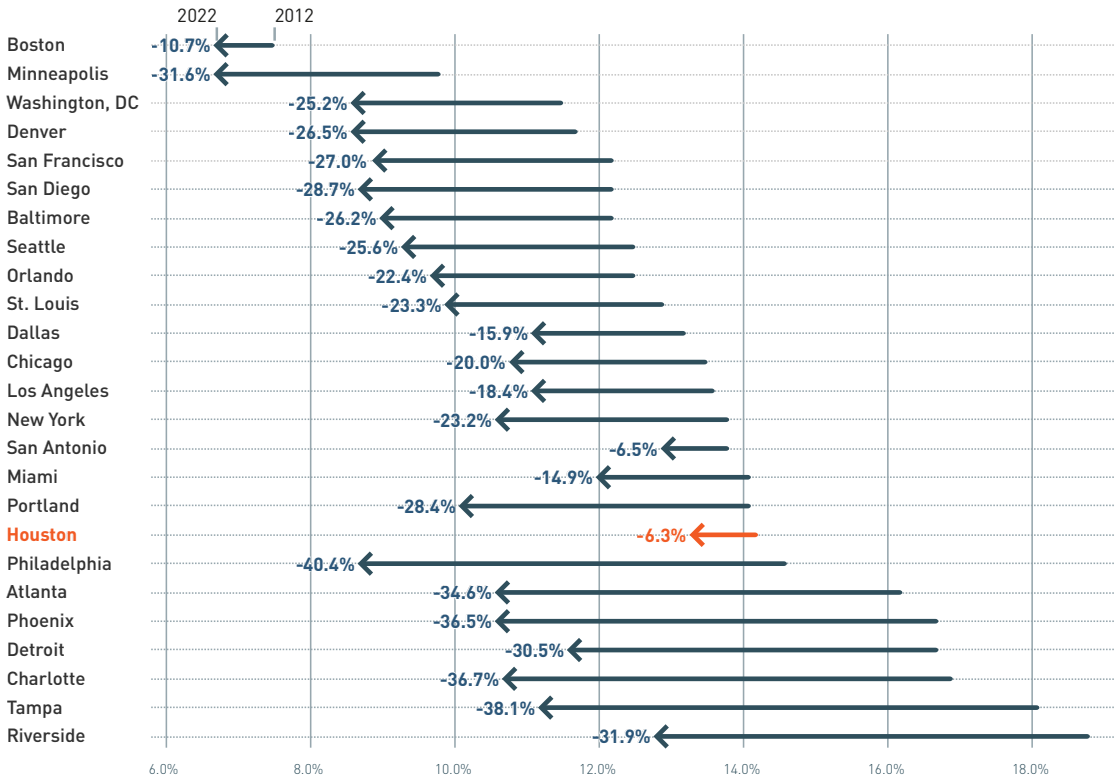


Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey 1-year estimates, 2009–2022.

Examining the 25 largest metro areas over the last 10 years makes clear that Houston, along with San Antonio, is an outlier (see **FIGURE 4**), with a substantially slower pace of improving young adult connection than most other metro areas in the aftermath of the Great Recession. Measure of America conducted an analysis of change in disconnection rates at the metro-area level for the largest metro areas in the United States, controlling for factors such as job growth, migration, GDP growth, educational attainment, population growth, demographic change, and more. These broad indicators are useful, but they don't capture nuances such as the educational quality, community resources, service providers, apprenticeship programs in each city, and so on. At the macro level, a couple of takeaways are clear, one of which is that **economic growth by itself isn't sufficient to connect young people to school and jobs**. Other metro areas that grew more slowly than Houston—in terms of both GDP and jobs—were better able to reconnect young adults after the Great Recession.

What else sets Houston apart from the rest of the United States and other metro areas that have reconnected a greater share of their young adults since the Great Recession? First, the population of young adults ages 16 to 24 has grown very quickly in Houston, 19 percent since 2012, a faster pace than other large metro

FIGURE 4 YOUTH DISCONNECTION PERCENTAGE CHANGE IN LARGE METROS, 2012–2022



Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey 1-year estimates, 2012–2022.
Note: For this analysis, the nine-county MSA was used for Houston, to enable apples-to-apples comparisons with other MSAs.

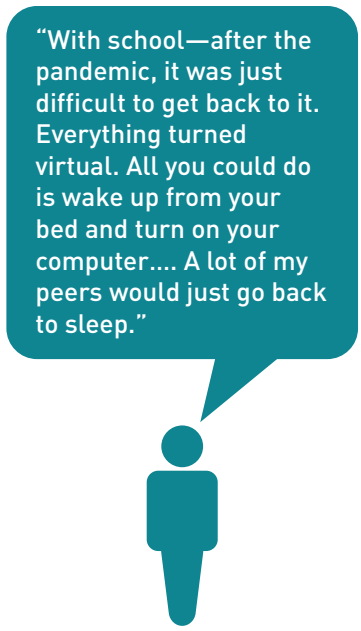
areas (except for Dallas, where this same population has increased 23 percent) and much faster than the United States as a whole, where the population between 16 and 24 has increased by just less than 1 percent over the same period. Second, **the share of young adults with at least an associate degree is unusually low in Houston (and San Antonio) relative to other large metro areas**: 13 percent in 2022, lower than the US average of 15 percent and the large-metro-area median of 17 percent. Even though the share of young adults with an associate degree or higher has increased substantially in Houston, it still lags large metro areas, including Dallas, where 16 percent of young adults have an associate or higher degree. Associate degree or higher attainment for young adults has increased nearly twice as fast in Dallas since 2012 compared to Houston. GDP and job growth are insufficient to explain why some metros are doing better at connecting youth than others. An intentional, well-resourced, broad, and deep set of youth connection strategies is required to move the needle and catch up.

Two characteristics of Houston that stand out over the last 10 years are a quickly growing 16- to 24-year-old population and a low share of young adults with postsecondary degrees.

The National Context and Impacts of Covid-19

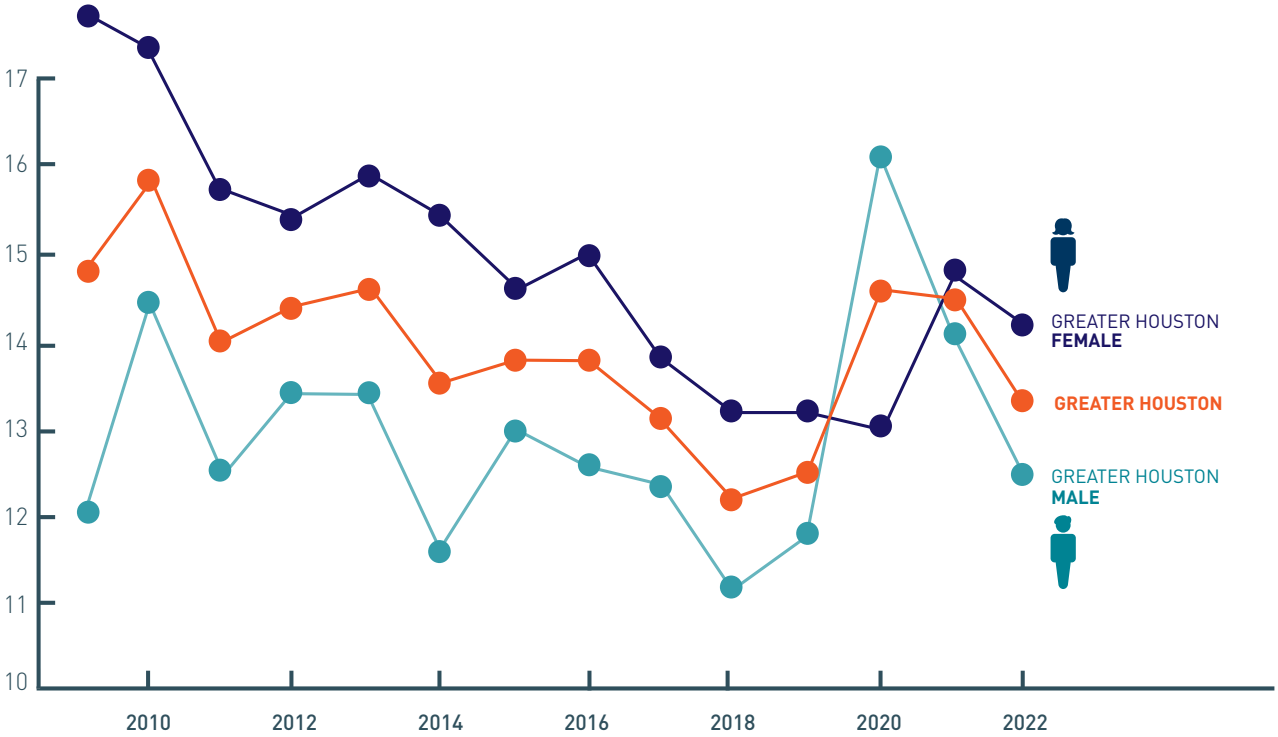
On the eve of the Covid-19 pandemic, the share of teens and young adults disconnected from both work and school in the United States was lower than it had been in over a decade: 10.7 percent. Between 2010 and 2019, the youth disconnection rate fell 27 percent, driven largely by the steady increase in youth employment in the years following the Great Recession. The 2020 national youth disconnection rate was 12.6 percent, or 4,830,700 disconnected youth—a Covid-fueled upward spike that reversed a decade-long decline in the share of the country's young people neither working nor in school. The rate dropped slightly in 2021 to 12.1 percent, or 4,680,900 young people.

At the national level, several postpandemic trends stand out. School enrollment for youth ages 16 to 24 dropped dramatically, especially among 18- to 19-year-olds embarking on what is traditionally the start of a college career. The broader 16–24 drop was mirrored in Houston: in 2019, 59.7 percent of Houston's young adults were in school or in school and working, and in 2022, 55.7 percent were. Other national-level trends included a drop in postsecondary enrollment rates across the board, but especially so for Hispanic and Native American young adults, who already had the lowest postsecondary enrollment rates prior to the pandemic. Another particularly striking finding is that the share of all young people with at least one disability increased sharply between 2019 and 2022. In 2019, 6.7 percent of young adults ages 16 to 24 had a disability; in 2022, 8.6 percent of young adults did: 3,414,800 individuals, an increase of over 800,000 young adults. The cognitive disability rate for young adults in this age group increased 32.6 percent from 2019, far more sharply than it did for other age groups; Covid-19 or Covid-associated mental health challenges are the likely culprit. Though older people are more likely than younger ones to suffer from long Covid, youth are not immune, and young adults have suffered from Covid-era depression more acutely than older Americans. While overall disability rates for youth from all racial and ethnic groups increased after Covid-19, Native American and Hispanic youth were especially affected.[11] Disability is discussed further, on **PAGE 31**.



Houston young person

FIGURE 5 YOUTH DISCONNECTION AND GENDER IN GREATER HOUSTON, 2009–2022



Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey 1-year estimates, 2009–2022.

Change over Time by Gender in Greater Houston

Girls and young women in Greater Houston are more likely to be disconnected than boys and young men, 14.2 percent versus 12.5 percent, a trend in evidence since 2009 and interrupted only by a spike in male disconnection in 2020 (see **FIGURE 5**). Though the gap has narrowed since 2009—going from a gender gap of over 5 percentage points to just under 2 percentage points in 2022—this gap remains noteworthy because it runs counter to the situation in the United States overall, where the female rate has long been lower than the male rate.

From 2021 to 2022, the male disconnection rate in Houston recovered at a faster clip than the female disconnection rate. This echoes a similar phenomenon at the national level, where girls and young women are out of school and out of work at a statistically significantly higher rate than before the pandemic—which does not hold true for boys and young men. This disparity is worth keeping a close eye on to ensure the recovery from the pandemic, and future improvements to the well-being of young people in the Greater Houston area, are equitably distributed.

Houston was less efficient than other metro areas in terms of converting job growth to improved opportunities for young adults.

Opportunity to Change Course

As mentioned earlier (see **FIGURE 4**), Houston was less efficient than other metro areas in terms of converting job growth to improved opportunities for young adults. A full accounting of why economic growth in Houston didn't translate to youth connection is beyond this paper's scope, but there are factors that might help explain it, based on Measure of America's analysis of change over time in the 9 County Houston MSA relative to the other 24 largest metro areas in the United States. First, Houston's young people have been and remain less likely than residents of other large metro areas or the United States as a whole to have associate or higher degrees, an attribute strongly linked with connection to the workforce. Second, the population of young adults 16–24 in Houston sharply increased by 19 percent (142,000 young people) since 2012, and it is possible that institutions and resources that ordinarily lead to youth and young adult connection have not kept pace with this population growth.

When government, philanthropy, service providers, educators, and industry leaders coordinate efforts, they can generate more meaningful progress for young adults than what economic growth can deliver unassisted.

When Measure of America began researching youth disconnection in 2012, Phoenix was ranked last among the top 25 largest metro areas in our inaugural report, *One in Seven*. This eventually led to a front-page story in *The Arizona Republic*. The Maricopa County Education Service Agency spearheaded a multisector effort to address the issue, with a backbone organization, Opportunities For Youth, in place at Arizona State University. The private sector got involved—Starbucks selected Phoenix to participate in its 100,000 Opportunities Initiative, a private-sector coalition led by Starbucks that brought job and training opportunities for disconnected youth to several cities. Government agencies convened stakeholders, raised awareness, and broke down silos between agencies. The Phoenix R.I.S.E. Program, a public-private partnership, funded paid summer internships. The Phoenix Public Library launched two initiatives focusing on high school completion: ReEngage Phoenix, a help center, and Career Online High School, an online alternative to earn a high school diploma. A physical high school dedicated to nontraditional students opened too.[12] Government agencies coordinated around helping young adults, magnifying the efforts of employers, service providers, and philanthropy. A broad-based collaborative effort in Phoenix appears to have paid dividends, and contributed to a sharp decrease in disconnection between 2013 and 2017, a faster decrease than seen in other metro areas or than local economic conditions would suggest.

The 13 County Region is now in a position similar to that of Phoenix 12 years ago: it has the highest share of young adults who are not in school and not working among the top 25 largest US metro areas. That said, Greater Houston has a dynamic economy at the forefront of growing, high-paying industries, world-class educational institutions, and ample resources that, when marshalled, can achieve impressive results.

In addition to Phoenix, seven other metro areas saw decreases in the youth disconnection rate of 30 percent or more: Minneapolis, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Detroit, Charlotte, Tampa, and Riverside. The trajectory of metro areas show that **Greater Houston can connect significantly more youth and young adults to jobs and school, which would benefit families, individuals, schools, employers, and communities across the 13 County Region**.

CHARACTERISTICS OF OPPORTUNITY YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS

Stubborn gaps in disconnection rates nationally among different youth populations and the divergent experiences of Houston and Phoenix suggest that **economic growth by itself is not enough**; barriers to school and work that specific groups of young people disproportionately face must be addressed. This section explores how different groups of youth are faring, with a view to identifying some of the drivers of disconnection in Houston.

The following estimates are based on 2018–2022 data from the US Census Bureau. Rolling up five years of survey data trades timeliness for accuracy: since the amount of people surveyed is larger across five years, we can talk with more accuracy about the characteristics of smaller and more specific groups of young adults.

Houston's overall youth disconnection rate across this five-year time period is 13.2 percent. Note that this five-year rate is very slightly lower than the single-year 2022 rate of 13.3. Throughout this section, references are made to 2022 disconnection rates in the United States and Texas to provide context.

BOX 3 What Do All These Numbers Mean?

In this section, percentages are presented in two ways.

1. RATE OF YOUTH DISCONNECTION AMONG A PARTICULAR GROUP:

How many young people in a particular group are disconnected?

$$\frac{\text{(\# of young women who are disconnected)}}{\text{(total \# of young women)}} \times 100 =$$

14.2%
of all young women in Houston are disconnected

2. RATE OF A PARTICULAR ATTRIBUTE AMONG DISCONNECTED YOUTH:

How many disconnected youth have a particular attribute?

$$\frac{\text{(\# of young women who are disconnected)}}{\text{(total \# of disconnected youth)}} \times 100 =$$

52.1%
of all disconnected youth in Houston are women

GENDER

As discussed earlier, in 2022, girls and young women in Greater Houston were more likely to be disconnected than boys and young men, 14.2 percent versus 12.5 percent, a trend in evidence since 2012 and interrupted only by a temporary spike in male disconnection in 2020.

Though the gap has narrowed since 2012, it remains noteworthy because it runs counter to the situation in the United States overall, where the female rate has long been lower than the male rate.

For the purposes of the discussion in this section, however, we examine opportunity youth characteristics of specific groups over a five-year period so that finer categorization is possible, such as: How do young women in poverty fare? How do young women who are mothers fare? And so on. For this reason, we focus here and in the remainder of this report on the five-year disconnection rate by gender. It follows the same pattern as the year-by-year analysis: in Greater Houston, young women have a slightly higher disconnection rate than young men, 13.6 percent and 12.8 percent, respectively. These gender gaps in Houston are not attributable to young women becoming mothers. While there is no single factor behind the gender disconnection gap, women experience higher rates of poverty than men nationwide and across all ages and most racial/ethnic groups—this can be attributed to the gender wage gap, the gender wealth gap, occupational segregation into low-paying jobs, and lack of workplace and societal supports to manage work and caregiving.[13] Additionally, years of Measure of America opportunity youth research have shown that in states and metro areas with larger Hispanic populations, the female disconnection rate tends to be higher than the corresponding male disconnection rate.

In Greater Houston, young women have a slightly higher disconnection rate than young men.

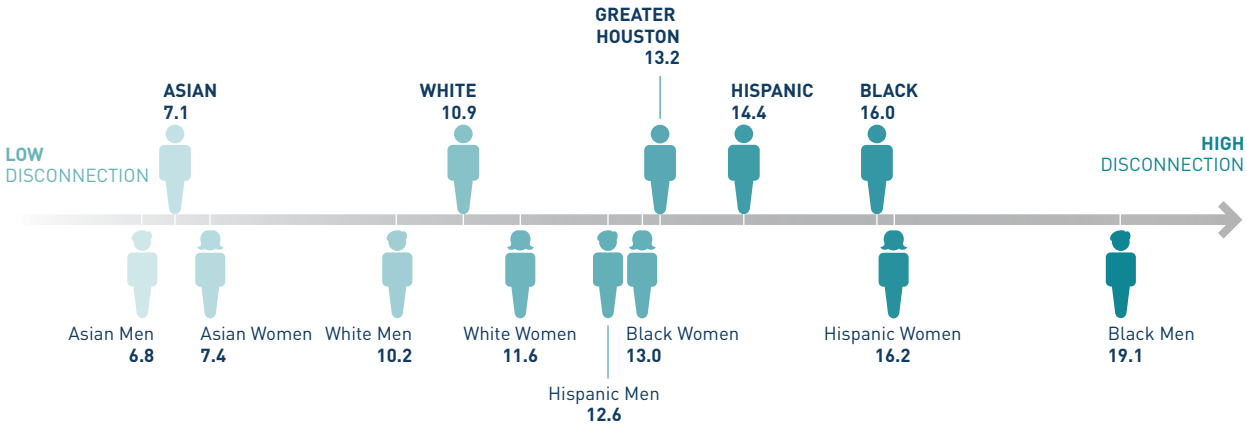
BOX 4 Youth Disconnection Among LGBTQ Youth

The US Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), the source of some of the data for our youth disconnection research, does not currently ask questions about either sexual orientation or gender identity. Male and female are the only gender options available on the ACS, leaving no option for those who identify as nonbinary. For these reasons, Measure of America cannot provide youth disconnection rates for LGBTQ young people. Such data would be very useful for those working to understand and address youth disconnection, as research suggests that LGBTQ youth disproportionately experience harassment and discrimination in schools and workplaces and are more likely than straight, cisgender young people to face mental health challenges.[14] In addition, in this report we refer to girls and women, boys and men—because we are talking about the data we have, which, as noted above, sort people into only two categories, male and female.

RACE AND ETHNICITY

In Greater Houston, the disconnection rate for Black youth, 16.0 percent, is the highest among the major racial and ethnic groups. The disconnection rate for Hispanic young adults is 14.4 percent, and the rate for white youth is 10.9 percent (see **FIGURE 6**). Asian youth in Greater Houston have the lowest disconnection rate, 7.1 percent.

FIGURE 6 YOUTH DISCONNECTION BY RACE AND ETHNICITY AND GENDER (%)

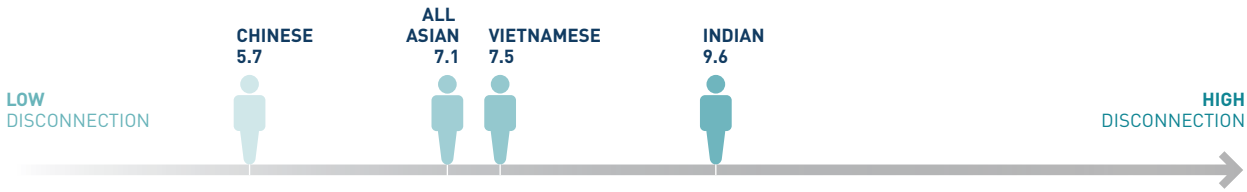


Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2018–2022.

Black youth make up 17.8 percent of the total youth population in Greater Houston and 21.7 percent of the opportunity youth and young adult population (25,900 young people). Hispanic youth comprise 46.1 percent of the total youth population and 50.2 percent of the opportunity youth population (60,000 young people). One in four opportunity youth in Greater Houston are Hispanic girls or young women (33,000 across the 13 counties). White youth represent 26.6 percent of the total youth population and 21.9 percent of the opportunity youth population (26,200 young people). Asian youth are 6.5 percent of the total youth population and 3.5 percent of the opportunity youth population (4,200 young people).

The category "Asian" is extremely broad, however. Among Asian subgroups, Indian young people have the highest disconnection rate, 9.6 percent, followed by Vietnamese young adults (7.5 percent) and Chinese young adults (5.7 percent). There are 1,300 disconnected Indian young people, 1,300 disconnected Vietnamese youth, and 500 disconnected young Chinese people. There are 1,100 other disconnected Asians with other or combined ancestry.

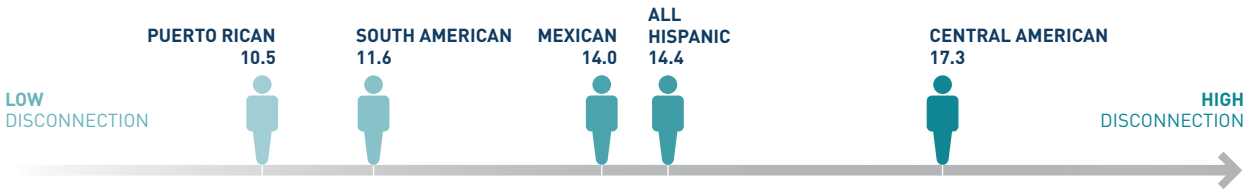
FIGURE 7 YOUTH DISCONNECTION BY ASIAN SUBGROUP (%)



Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2018–2022.

Hispanic youth have a disconnection rate of 14.4 percent and make up 50.2 percent of the opportunity youth population. Among Hispanics, the highest rate was found among Central American young people (17.3 percent, 11,000 youth), followed by Mexican youth (14.0 percent, 43,100 young people), South American youth (11.6 percent, 1,800 youth), and then Puerto Rican youth (10.5 percent, 800 young people).

FIGURE 8 YOUTH DISCONNECTION BY HISPANIC SUBGROUP (%)

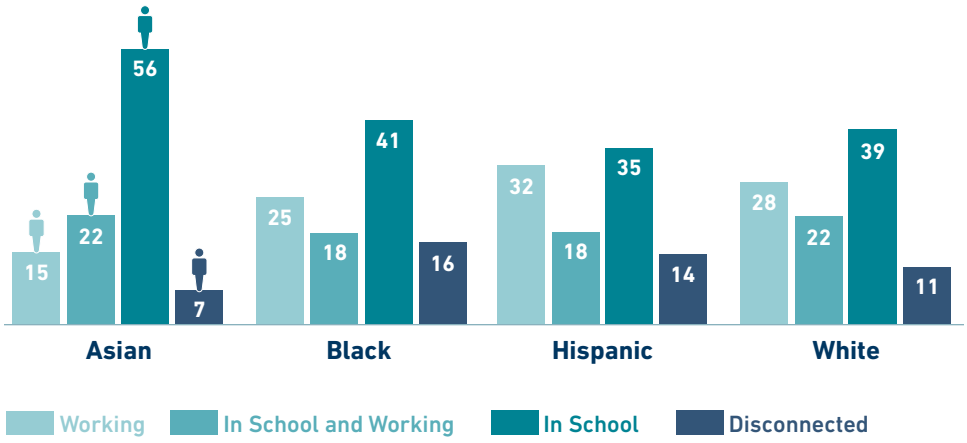


Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2018–2022.

The Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (NHOPI) and Native American populations in the Houston area are too small to allow for reliable estimates.

In crafting solutions, it is important to keep in mind that different groups of disconnected young people—for instance, young women and young men, Hispanic young people and white young people—face different challenges. A one-size-fits-all solution that does not take into account issues like racial bias in policing or race and gender biases in hiring could lead to improvements that are not shared equally among all youth.

FIGURE 9 CONNECTIONS TO WORK AND SCHOOL BY RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUP



Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2018–2022.

Hispanic and white young adults are equally likely to be in the workforce.

Black and white young adults have similar levels of school enrollment.

While rates of disconnection vary by racial and ethnic group, the causes for their disconnection are not uniform. Connection to education and the workforce also varies by racial and ethnic group. These patterns in Greater Houston echo national patterns: **Hispanic young people face more barriers to education, while Black young people face more barriers to employment**. Promisingly, Hispanic young people are connected to work at rates on par with white young people (50 percent of each group are either working or are working and in school). Black young people are connected to education at rates similar to white young people (59 percent of Black young people are in school or are working and in school, 61 percent of white young people are). While Black and Hispanic young people are experiencing disconnection at rates higher than white young people, their level of connection to education and the workforce varies by group. **Compared to national averages, Houston has more parity between Black and white young people in education and Hispanic and white young people in the workforce**. There are significantly wider gaps between these groups for education and work connection, respectively, for the United States as a whole. This is a promising finding that shows that patterns and disparities that may seem entrenched can be changed. Asian young people have the highest rate of connection to education at 78 percent, while their connection to work is lower than other groups, 37 percent.

BOX 5 Immigration and Opportunity Youth in Greater Houston

In Houston, young people who are not citizens make up 11.1 percent of the overall youth population, compared to 7.7 percent in Texas and only 5.5 percent in the United States as a whole. The disconnection rate for noncitizens in Houston is 18.1 percent, compared to 12.6 percent for citizens. These rates are similar to the state of Texas as a whole, 18.8 percent and 12.5 percent for noncitizens and citizens, respectively. In crafting solutions, it is important to be cognizant of the unique barriers to connection that these 18,100 noncitizen or undocumented disconnected young people face in Houston, among them lack of English proficiency, poor access to transportation, financial and administrative obstacles to college, and vulnerability in the labor market. It's also important to note that the undocumented population is generally undercounted in large administrative surveys, such as the American Community Survey undergirding this report.

One barrier to connection for many immigrant youth is limited English proficiency. **The disconnection rate for youth with limited English proficiency is 21.1 percent in Houston, compared to 12.4 percent for young Houston residents who are fluent in English.**

Transportation, a challenge for many disconnected young people who are citizens, creates a particularly high hurdle for undocumented youth. Undocumented immigrants in Texas are not allowed to hold a driver's license.[15] Undocumented immigrants who drive without a license face fines and even deportation if their documentation status is discovered during a traffic stop.

Each year in Texas, 18,000 undocumented students graduate high school.[16] In 2001, Texas greatly expanded their access to higher education, enacting a policy that allowed eligible undocumented students and, later, DACA recipients to qualify for state residency and thus pay in-state college tuition rates. This policy also allowed them to qualify and apply for state financial aid.[17] While this law provides substantial resources to the undocumented community, **taking advantage of it requires significant administration and awareness that likely limits the number of individuals who are able to do so**. For example, qualifying for this program requires providing an affidavit that says the student will file an application to become a permanent resident as soon as they are eligible to apply. Similarly, even with the assistance of state financial aid, costs may still limit the enrollment of undocumented young people in these programs.

Throughout Texas, immigrants make valuable contributions to the labor market: **roughly one-quarter of STEM workers and one-quarter of health aides are first-generation immigrants**.[18] For undocumented youth, however, quality employment can be difficult to find, and those who are able to find work are particularly vulnerable to workplace exploitation. Some undocumented immigrants are paid under the table or wrongly classified as contractors to skirt employment regulations. While access to employment is valuable, these off-the-books arrangements leave workers vulnerable to wage theft, unprotected by workplace safety rules, limited in their ability to organize, and at risk of harassment and coercion.[19]

POVERTY

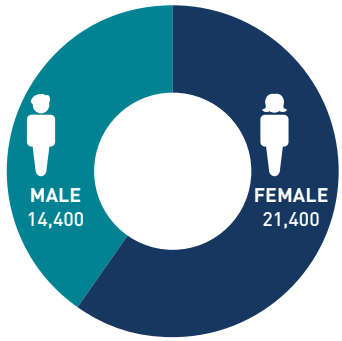
Poverty creates many barriers to connection and has a systemic, intergenerational effect on limiting access to opportunities. In Houston, as in the United States overall, living in poverty increases the likelihood that a young person will be disconnected. (Poverty thresholds vary by household size; the threshold for a one-person household in 2022 was $14,880, whereas the threshold for a five-person household was $35,510).[20] **More than one in five of the area's youth living in poverty are disconnected (24.0 percent), compared to 10.8 percent of youth in the region not living in poverty.** The poverty rate for youth living in the region is 16.9 percent; for disconnected youth, the poverty rate is even higher: 31.2 percent. The poverty rate for girls and young women in Greater Houston (19.1 percent) is higher than the poverty rate for boys and young men (14.8 percent). As mentioned earlier, women experience higher rates of poverty than men nationwide and across all ages.

A full 18.7 percent of all disconnected youth in Greater Houston are young women below the poverty line; an additional 12.5 percent of all disconnected youth are young men below the poverty line.

As noted in Measure of America's 2020 national report on youth disconnection, "Poverty compounds a range of barriers to connection, among them the concentration of low-income families in neighborhoods with poor-quality educational, health, and transportation services; the greater exposure of people living in poverty to violence and the resulting trauma; the lack of financial resources needed to cover the costs of college; and the cumulative impacts of intergenerational, concentrated poverty."[21]

Research—including Measure of America's—suggests that place matters for poverty and social mobility, and disparities between neighboring communities can be large.[22] See **PAGE 48** for a place-based analysis of opportunity for young adults in Greater Houston.

DISCONNECTED YOUTH IN POVERTY BY GENDER



Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2018–2022.

DISABILITY AND MENTAL HEALTH

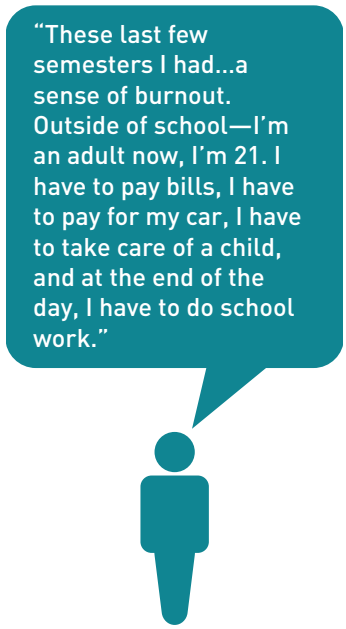
Living with a disability is still a barrier to full participation in society for too many Americans. More than a quarter (27.8 percent) of all youth with a disability in Houston are disconnected, which is greater than the rate in the United States overall, 25.4 percent. The Census Bureau considers a person to have a disability if they report difficulty with hearing, seeing even with glasses, walking, climbing stairs, dressing, bathing, doing errands alone, concentrating, remembering, or making decisions.[23] (This designation is based on people's responses to the ACS and does not necessarily indicate a medical diagnosis.) **In Houston, youth with disabilities are 13.3 percent of the opportunity youth and young adult population and only 6.3 percent of the total youth population.** This proportion is similar to that of the United States overall, where youth with disabilities make

up 20.0 percent of the disconnected youth population and 8.6 percent of the total youth population. The share of youth with disabilities in Houston increased by 34.5 percent since 2019, or by 22,100 youth.

Nationally, the number of young people with disabilities increased significantly following Covid. Over the course of the pandemic (2019–2021), the youth population increased by 0.6 percent while the disabled youth population increased by 18.4 percent. The increase was greatest among youth with cognitive disabilities. Long Covid's impact on cognitive functioning, the mental health impacts of lockdowns, and greater awareness of disabilities may have contributed to these increases.[24]

In Greater Houston, youth with cognitive disabilities are the largest share of the population with one or more disabilities, and 30.9 percent of those with cognitive disabilities are disconnected. Although the share of youth with cognitive disabilities in Houston is still below the share of youth with these disabilities nationally, the rate of increase in cognitive disabilities in Houston is as high as it is nationally. In the American Community Survey, cognitive disability is derived from question 18a, which asked respondents if, due to physical, mental, or emotional condition, they or members of their household had "serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions."

There's an important distinction between young people with mental health challenges and those with cognitive disabilities—these are different categories, though they may overlap at times. CDC data on all of Texas show that in 2022, **25 percent of Texas youth ages 18 to 24 have been diagnosed at some point with a form of depression: 748,000 young adults**. This is a marked difference from 2019, when 19 percent of Texans ages 18 to 24 had been told by a medical professional that they had some form of depression at some point in their lives. Kaiser Family Foundation analysis of Census data shows that among all adults in Texas with a depressive or anxiety disorder, 30 percent report not being able to access the counseling or therapy that they require.[25] This need is acute and unmet.



Houston young person

HEALTH: INSURANCE, FOOD SECURITY, AND SUBSTANCE USE

In Houston, 27.4 percent of all youth do not have health insurance of any type. These young people are more than twice as likely to be disconnected as their insured peers—22.1 percent of those without insurance are disconnected, compared to 9.8 percent of those with insurance. In Houston overall, the disconnection rate among youth with public insurance (primarily Medicaid), a subset of those with health insurance, is 17.3 percent. **Nearly half (45.9 percent) of the opportunity youth and young adult population do not have health insurance.**

In Houston, 20.9 percent of young people who live in a household that receives Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits are disconnected,

almost double the rate of those in households not receiving SNAP benefits, 11.8 percent. More than 1 in 7 (15.5 percent) of young people in Houston live in households that receive these benefits. SNAP benefits serve as a proxy for severe poverty—for youth living in SNAP-receiving households, the disconnection rate is slightly lower than that of youth living in poverty overall, 24.0 percent.

Substance use disorders and overdose deaths represent a distinct and acute manifestation of mental health crises, influenced to some degree by the availability of healthcare and health resources. The availability of comprehensive health resources, including mental health support and addiction recovery services, is crucial in mitigating the impact of these challenges. Texas is struggling with an increase in drug overdoses, especially in young people, yet the funding environment for residential treatment options is bleak.[26]

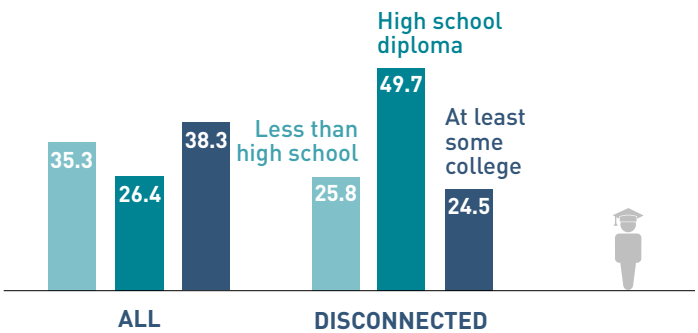
"If I don't have gas I can't get to class, if I don't have money for a textbook I can't do the class assignments. I still have to pay for applications, tuition. I've been taking out loan after loan...just to better myself."

Houston young person

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Among all youth ages 16 to 24 in Houston (not just those who are out of school and out of work), roughly one-third have not yet finished high school, one-quarter have a high school diploma but no further education, and two-fifths have at least some postsecondary education. Among disconnected youth, the majority (49.7 percent) have a high school diploma but no further education, and only 24.5 percent have started or completed college (see **FIGURE 10**). But the fact that **so many disconnected youth do have a high school diploma** also points to a need for more accessible postsecondary pathways for high school graduates—be they higher education, apprenticeships, technical education, or work that does not require a four-year degree. In the United States overall, disconnected youth have higher levels of educational attainment: 53.7 percent of disconnected youth have a high school diploma but no further education, and 23.1 percent have started or completed college. In addition to postsecondary pathways, college completion rates indicate a strong need for increased wraparound support to help young people to the finish line.

FIGURE 10 EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AMONG HOUSTON YOUTH (%)



Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2018–2022.

The impact of having less education becomes clear when looking at the outcomes for youth ages 22 to 24, an age range by which many if not most young adults have finished their formal schooling. For this cohort, disconnection is most common among youth with lower levels of education. Over one-third of youth ages 22 to 24 in Greater Houston who have less than a high school diploma are disconnected (36.7 percent, or 11,100 young adults), compared to 27.3 percent of those with a high school diploma (23,300 young adults) but no further education and 10.2 percent of those who have at least some college-level education (19,000 young adults) (see **FIGURE 11**). Higher levels of educational attainment result in more opportunities for employment, as the data clearly reflect. Helping youth continue their education reduces the chance that they will be disconnected in the future. These findings also highlight the need for opportunities for youth who haven't completed college as well as alternatives to higher education that put young people on the path to well-paying jobs. Higher levels of education are also associated with a host of noneconomic benefits, including better health, more stable relationships, and a greater ability to adjust to change.

"Some of my friends are opportunity youth.... They didn't have any job history when they graduated high school so they struggled with getting a job, or jobs that weren't paying enough, or jobs with really high turnovers."

Houston young person

High School Graduation

A large share of opportunity youth and young adults in Houston—about half—have high school diplomas but have not begun any further education. The fact that 49.7 percent of youth (59,300 people) who are neither working nor in school have a high school diploma may come as a surprise to many readers. Who are these disconnected diploma-holders?

First, they are more likely to be young women than young men. Young women who complete high school and do not continue on to higher education are more likely to be disconnected (26.5 percent) than their male counterparts (23.4 percent). This difference is especially stark among Hispanic youth; Hispanic women are 1.4 times as likely to be disconnected as Hispanic men in this group (28.6 percent vs. 20.0 percent). What could explain this higher disconnection rate

FIGURE 11 DISCONNECTION RATES FOR YOUNG ADULTS AGES 22–24 BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT (%)

HIGHEST EDUCATIONAL CREDENTIAL	DISCONNECTION RATE (%)
LESS THAN HS DIPLOMA	36.7
HS DIPLOMA OR EQUIVALENT	27.3
AT LEAST SOME COLLEGE	10.2

Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2018–2022.

among women? There is a slight difference in labor force participation between genders in this cohort: 71.7 percent of young men whose highest educational credential is a high school diploma participate in the labor force (meaning they have a job or are looking for work), compared to 63.7 percent of young women.

For both women and men, limited access to higher education may keep many young people from continuing their educations beyond high school. Further, while a high school degree was once sufficient for a living-wage job, the labor market now heavily favors those with education beyond high school, in the form of a bachelor's or associate degree or a professional certification of some kind. Today, high school is less an educational capstone than a stepping-stone to further education and training. One of the headline findings of Texas 2036 (a public policy think tank focused on Texas's future well-being) is an estimation that by 2036, **more than 70 percent of jobs in Texas will require a postsecondary credential**.[27]

Today, high school is less an educational capstone than a stepping-stone to further education and training.

There is wide variability in on-time high school graduation rates by place in the 13 County Region. Texas Education Agency data add context to this story. **MAP 15** at the back of the report shows a wide range in on-time high school graduation outcomes by county—here, graduation rate refers to the percentage of students from a class of beginning ninth graders who graduate within four years. Students who enter the system during those four years are added to the class and students who leave the system for reasons other than graduating are subtracted. We also present school-district-level data (**MAP 14**). District-level rates were calculated for federal, not state-level accountability reporting; county-level rates include students who attend charter or specialized schools not tied to specific districts, which in some cases results in county-level graduation rates far lower than those of the county's constituent districts.

Chronic absenteeism (defined as missing more than 10 percent of the school year or around 18 days a year) is on the rise nationally and in Texas. Before the pandemic, around 12 percent of Texas K-12 students were chronically absent; in the 2021–2022 school year, **26 percent of students in Texas were chronically absent** (similar to national levels of postpandemic absenteeism). Houston Independent School District (ISD) is not faring any better: 28 percent of students in Houston ISD were chronically absent in the 2021-22 school year, and an alarming 38 percent of Black students in Houston ISD were chronically absent.[28]

It's important to note that the state takeover of the Houston ISD, which took effect in March 2023, did not affect the youth disconnection rates discussed in this report, as the data are from 2022. However, it could well have an effect on youth disconnection in future years.

Expanding College and Postsecondary Workforce and Technical Education

Family socioeconomic status plays a major role in college enrollment and completion rates. Nationwide, 58 percent of students from high-income families

earn bachelor's degrees by age 24, compared to just 12 percent of students from low-income families—a nearly fivefold difference. The share of low-income young people who earn bachelor's degrees is only six percentage points higher today than it was in 1965, while the share of high-income young people who obtain four-year college degrees has shot up 18 percentage points.[29] A 10-year longitudinal study by the National Center for Educational Statistics found that even low-income young people at the top of their class were much less likely to earn bachelor's degrees than high-income students at the bottom of their class.[30] Statistics like these show what Greater Houston's families and young people know firsthand: **even the most academically capable young people living in poverty face far more barriers to college than their peers in wealthier neighborhoods**. Challenges related to academic preparation, family expectations and knowledge about college, financial resources, and—related to that—the need to work to obtain basic necessities all conspire to impede college matriculation and completion for low-income young people.

A four-year degree, of course, is not the only route to meaningful connection in young adulthood. While the empirical research about the impacts of career and technical education (CTE) is thin, a number of reports suggest that taking CTE courses in high school leads to higher rates of high school completion, increased earnings in the first seven years after high school, and even higher test scores, although many of these benefits appear to accrue more for young men than for young women.[31] A comprehensive study on CTE in the Houston region by the Kinder Institute's Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC) released in October 2023 provides many useful insights: over two-thirds of Houston region high school graduates were CTE graduates; CTE graduates enrolled in college at higher rates than non-CTE graduates, but attained degrees at similar rates to the non-CTE cohort; Black CTE graduates enrolled in college at similar rates to their white peers but were the least likely group to attain a degree or certification; the majority of CTE graduates who enrolled at two-year institutions did not attain an associate degree or professional certification.[32] This indicates an urgent need to build pipeline supports for young adults to remain in college and certification programs, especially for those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Focusing on enrollment rate metrics is not enough if degree- or certificate-granting programs have high attrition rates.

This indicates an urgent need to build pipeline supports for young adults to remain in college and certification programs, especially for those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Evidence strongly suggests that CTE courses must be accompanied by wraparound counseling and support to ensure that students stay engaged in their programs and establish meaningful work connections in their field. To make these programs as effective as possible, considerations should also include transportation support, as lack of a reliable means to travel to and from school presents a major barrier to connection for communities across America and Greater Houston (see **PAGE 42** for data on vehicle ownership in the region) and the facilitation of career and technical student organizations, which have been

shown to improve student outcomes, particularly among young women.[33]

Workforce and technical education, associate degrees, and vocational certificates offer many pathways to secure livelihoods and can open the door to higher education for first-generation students and others facing barriers to four-year degree programs. Community and technical colleges provide educational opportunities that allow students to gain job skills, move up in their fields, and transfer to four-year colleges; they are a key part of any reconnection strategy.

LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION AND WORK EXPERIENCE

Youth who are disconnected may be spending their time in any number of ways, including actively seeking employment. People who are unemployed and actively looking for work are considered to be "in the labor force" along with those who have jobs, and those who are not looking for work are considered "not in the labor force," which includes people in school not looking for work. For the purposes of this research report, for a young person to be "connected," they must have a job—they can't just be looking for one.

Half of opportunity youth in Greater Houston have not worked in the past five years.

Apprenticeship programs and work-based learning programs can reconnect them to the labor market.

All told, in Greater Houston there are 85,000 disconnected youth who are out of the labor force—by definition, they are not enrolled in school and are not looking for work—while 34,400 disconnected youth are in the labor force: they are looking for work and not enrolled in school. The 85,000 disconnected young people out of the labor force may be discouraged workers who have given up seeking employment, they may be caring for children or other family members, or they may be doing something else. **All told, seven out of ten opportunity youth and young adults in Greater Houston are not actively looking for work**.

Furthermore, among all youth and young adults in the 13 County Region, 35.8 percent haven't worked in the past five years (or ever), in contrast to the rest of the United States, where 26.6 percent haven't worked in the past five years. Of course, a significant chunk of this population is still "on track" and enrolled full-time in school, but it's noteworthy that **an unusually large share of all young people in Greater Houston have no recent work experience**.

While some disconnected youth have previously held a job, many have not, and a lack of work experience often makes it difficult for youth to obtain employment. In Greater Houston, 50.7 percent of opportunity youth have not worked in the past five years: 60,500 young people.

In the region overall, the disconnection rate for those ages 21 to 24 who have never worked or last worked more than five years ago is 53.4 percent. These 30,100 relatively older youth who are out of school and with no recent work experience face significant barriers to connection. They make up one-fourth (25.2 percent) of all disconnected youth in Houston. Difficulty finding and securing quality entry-level job opportunities could contribute to disconnection rates for young women and men in this category. Apprenticeships, work-based learning programs, and work-oriented volunteering programs—giving individuals skills and experience that they can add to their resume—would be useful interventions.

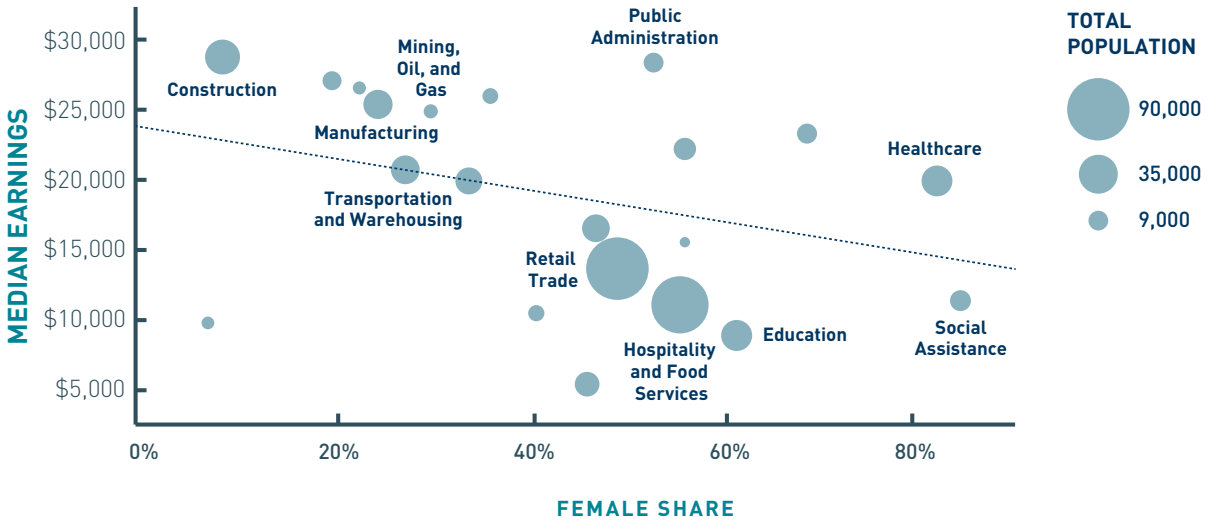
Middle-Skill Jobs and Labor Market Projections

Middle-skill jobs are commonly defined as jobs that require education or training beyond high school but not a four-year college degree. This could consist of an associate degree, a professional certification, an apprenticeship, or moderate-to-long-term on-the-job training. For the purposes of this analysis, we will look at labor market outcomes for young adults 16 to 24 who have a high school diploma or GED but no bachelor's or higher degree, and make more than $40,000 annually—a threshold that, based on the 2020 Greater Houston Regional Workforce Study, seems to indicate a solid middle-skill job since "most middle-skill jobs in Houston are above...[the 2020] median annual earnings level for the Houston area ($39,832)."[34] This report also indicates that **middle-skill jobs account for a larger share of regional jobs than the national average and have outpaced the nation in growth during the last few years**.

Middle-skill jobs are commonly defined as jobs that require education or training beyond high school but not a four-year college degree.

These jobs are not evenly distributed across gender and race. In Greater Houston, 36,400 young adults 16 to 24 who have a high school diploma but no bachelor's or higher degree have jobs that earn more than $40,000 annually. A whopping 73.9 percent of these well-paying middle-skill jobs are held by men, and 26.1 percent are held by women—**around three times as many young men as young women are employed in these well-paying middle-skill roles.** There are differences by race and ethnicity; of young adults 16 to 24 who have a high school diploma but not a bachelor's degree, 8.4 percent of white young adults have jobs

FIGURE 12 MIDDLE-SKILL JOBS BY GENDER AND EARNINGS IN GREATER HOUSTON



"Middle-skill" jobs are defined as those requiring a HS diploma but not a bachelor's or higher degree. Female share refers to the share of each industry workforce that is female. All data are for ages 16 to 24 in Greater Houston.

Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2018–2022.

that earn more than $40,000 annually, and 8.1 percent of Hispanic young adults have jobs in this pay range, compared to 4.5 percent of Black young women and men.

FIGURE 12 shows, for those ages 16 to 24 in Greater Houston, the relationship between industrial sectors, earnings in these sectors, and the share of each sector's workforce that is female. A clear pattern emerges: the highest-earning and male-dominated middle-skill jobs are in industries in the top left corner, including construction, manufacturing, and resource extraction. Jobs in these sectors pay better on average than those in female-dominated sectors of healthcare, education, and social assistance in the bottom right-hand corner of the figure, an advantage that generally only increases with time.

In the Gulf Coast workforce board region, five of the top 10 occupational areas with the forecasted greatest average number of annual job openings between 2020 and 2030 had average annual wages greater than $30,000.[35] Of these five occupational areas, two are dominated by men (laborers and stockers), one is evenly split (retail salespeople), and two are dominated by women (customer service representatives and office clerks). These jobs are a little bit lower on the pay scale than the well-paid middle-skill jobs; it's important that the relative gender balance in these fastest-growing occupational areas doesn't distract from the key finding **that better-paid middle-skill jobs are overwhelmingly the domain of young men**. Furthermore, some of these jobs that have high projected openings may have high turnover rates. It's important that workforce development programs prepare youth for quality jobs that are in demand, not just any jobs that are in demand. As an example of what this can look like in practice—in April 2024, the Greater Houston Partnership, UpSkill Houston initiative, Accenture and the Center for Houston's Future launched a new workforce development initiative to prepare young adults from disadvantaged communities for jobs in the hydrogen economy, a growing industry kickstarted by a $1.2 billion Department of Energy grant. This initiative recommends developing targeted engagement and training programs for "personas" of workers with the skills in their current career who can adapt to middle-skill, high-demand roles in the hydrogen economy—roles that are likely to provide "a significant financial uplift for [individuals] transitioning into the hydrogen industry."[36]

Finding and creating employment and well-paying pathways for young adults without advanced degrees, particularly in middle-skill jobs, is crucial to promoting their connection. Special attention needs to be paid to ensuring that these jobs are open to women and Black young adults.

Finding and creating employment and well-paying pathways for young adults without advanced degrees is crucial to promoting their connection.

MOTHERHOOD AND MARRIAGE

The disconnection rate among mothers in the 16- to 24-year-old age range, 41.7 percent, is much higher than that of young women without children, 10.8

percent. Compared to the United States overall, mothers are overrepresented in the opportunity youth population in Houston. In the United States, 19.7 percent of disconnected women are mothers; in Greater Houston, 28.2 percent of disconnected young women are mothers. In the region, disconnected young women are roughly 4.5 times as likely to be mothers as connected young women.

Similar to the situation for mothers, the disconnection rate among married young people, 26.4 percent, is higher than that among unmarried youth, 12.2 percent. Some married partners may choose to divide household responsibilities in such a way that one person works for pay and the other does not. While the partner who is not working for pay may be doing valuable domestic or child-rearing work, research shows that being out of the workforce, be it to raise children or for some other reason, limits later career trajectories and earnings.[37]

In Texas in 2021, 12 percent of children had a family member who either quit a job, did not take a job, or had to significantly change a job due to childcare issues.[38] Burdensome childcare costs can be a significant barrier for young mothers' ability to work or attend school. When childcare costs are high and the cost of childcare approaches parity with the post-tax wage someone can earn, women are less likely to enter or remain in the labor force.

DISCONNECTED

28.2%

OF WOMEN WHO ARE DISCONNECTED HAVE CHILDREN

CONNECTED

6.2%

OF WOMEN WHO ARE CONNECTED HAVE CHILDREN

Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2018–2022.

Who Are Disconnected Mothers?

Early motherhood is more common in Houston than in the United States as a whole. Only 6.2 percent of all young women between the ages of 16 and 24 are mothers nationally, compared to 9.2 percent in Greater Houston. Women in the 13 County Region who have children are more likely to be disconnected (41.7 percent) than those who do not (10.8 percent). Mothers are slightly more likely to be disconnected in Greater Houston than they are nationally (in the US as a whole, 33.4 percent of mothers in this age range are not in school and not working). **There are 17,000 disconnected mothers in Greater Houston.**

Disconnected young mothers differ from those who are connected in some ways; they are, for example, more likely to be white, to be married, and to live in poverty. Among the most striking findings of this report is how pervasive poverty is among young mothers in the region: 31.3 percent of all young mothers, and an alarming 41.2 percent of disconnected young mothers, live in poverty. These poverty rates are far higher than those of young women as a whole in the region (19.1 percent) and even surpass that of disconnected youth as a whole (31.2 percent). It is worth noting that the poverty line takes into account the number of individuals in a household, so if a family grows but their income remains the same, the household moves closer to the poverty line as this family now has the additional expenses of raising a child. **It is deeply concerning that two in five opportunity youth who are mothers are living in poverty—7,000 young mothers—parenting young children while struggling to cover the very basic**

costs of living: shelter, food, transportation, utilities, and the like. This high poverty rate among young mothers also has negative impacts on their children's current and future well-being. Research shows that living in poverty in early childhood can have serious health, educational, and employment repercussions later in life.[39]

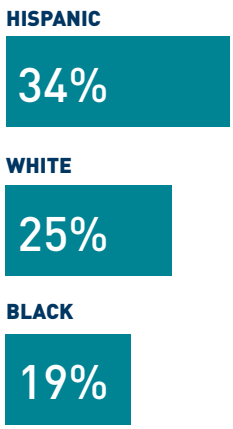
Among the major racial and ethnic groups in Greater Houston, the highest disconnection rate is found among white mothers (48.2 percent, or 3,400 mothers), followed by Hispanic mothers (45.2 percent, or 11,200 mothers). Black mothers have the lowest rate, 26.3 percent (2,000 mothers). The sample size of Asian mothers is too small to calculate a reliable disconnection rate.

One in three Hispanic young women who are not in school and not working are mothers (33.9 percent), compared to 25.2 percent of disconnected white young women and 19.0 percent of Black young women. Analysis by the Pew Research Center finds that among American mothers, Hispanic mothers are among the most likely to be stay-at-home mothers and believe that's best for kids.[40] Supports for reengaging these young women in educational or vocational pathways would likely need to keep the whole family in mind.

Becoming a mother is a common life experience; 86 percent of US women have at least one child by the end of their reproductive years.[41] But the timing for doing so varies sharply for connected and disconnected women. Connected young women tend to postpone parenthood to pursue other options in their teens and early 20s, such as continuing their educations or building their careers. For young women who lack such options, having a child may offer a rewarding role and an attainable route to adult standing. Unintended pregnancies also play a role; we know that disparities in unintended pregnancies by income and educational attainment in the United States are large but narrowing.[42]

The point of this discussion is not to suggest that there is a right or wrong time to have a child, but rather to acknowledge that having a baby affects educational and career prospects, that educational and career prospects affect the decision to have a baby, and that disconnection during emerging adulthood, no matter the reason, affects long-term economic prospects.

SHARE OF DISCONNECTED GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN WHO ARE MOTHERS



Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2018–2022.

HOUSEHOLD AND FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS

Household and family characteristics—like neighborhood-level poverty and resources—tend to drive disconnection from work and school. Of the 217,000 young Houstonians ages 16 to 17 and legally children, only 2.1 percent of those living with both parents are disconnected from work and school. This rate doubles for children with just one parent—4.4 percent of children living with one parent are disconnected—and triples again for children not living with any parent, of which 11.8 percent are not in school and not in work. These numbers all seem lower than the Houston average because they only count people under 18. However, the tendencies these numbers convey continue to influence the

opportunities available to children after they legally become adults. Children in two-parent households tend to have better socioeconomic outcomes than those in one- or no-parent households.

Overcrowding—defined as having more than one person per room of the house (such as three people living in a one-bedroom apartment)—is a proxy for poverty, housing instability, and vulnerability to Covid-19 spread. Research indicates that overcrowding has a negative impact on physical and mental well-being, that it can impede early childhood development, and that it plays a role in transmitting poverty intergenerationally.[43] Research by the Kinder Institute in 2019 found that Harris County had higher rates of overcrowding than Manhattan.[44] For people ages 16 to 24 in the Greater Houston region, 12.5 percent live in overcrowded housing. Of these 113,500 youth and young adults, 17.6 percent (or 19,900) are not in school and not working. **One in six opportunity youth and young adults live in overcrowded housing in the Greater Houston area**. Young people are more likely to live in overcrowded housing than adults.

Access to broadband is another important measure of housing quality and a proxy for the opportunities available to young adults. Covid-19 made clearer than ever that high-speed broadband can no longer be treated as an optional luxury. Remote learning, working from home, and seeing a doctor virtually—trends that are here to stay in some way or another—are only possible with fast, reliable internet. This access will remain critical for job searches, school projects, accessing public benefits of all sorts, and myriad other important tasks. In the Houston area, young adults who live in housing with broadband have slightly lower rates of disconnection from work and school, 11.5 percent. For the **41,300 young adults in the 13 County Region with no internet connection (not even cellphone data plans) at home, 23.2 percent are out of school and out of work: 9,600 young people**. Having no internet at home doubles the likelihood of disconnection from work and school.

Having no internet at home doubles the chance of disconnection from work and school.

Access to transportation—in Houston and surrounding counties, primarily personal cars—is another key means by which young adults can access the opportunities available to them. Young adults living in a household with no vehicles (33,600 in the Houston area) are disconnected from work and school at a rate of 21.3 percent. The 123,900 young adults who have more than three people per car in their household are disconnected at a rate of 20.2 percent. All told, 26.9 percent of opportunity youth and young adults in Greater Houston either live in a household with more than three people per car or no car at all: 32,200 young people. Solutions designed to reach these young adults need to keep this aspect of their experience in mind, as it complicates accessing education, services, trainings, and job opportunities.

INSTITUTIONALIZED AND SYSTEMS-INVOLVED YOUTH

One factor that can affect youth disconnection rates, especially in rural areas, is the presence of jails and prisons. In Measure of America's national research,

all youth are counted, including those living in institutional group quarters—the Census Bureau's designation for institutional nonhousehold living arrangements, including prisons, detention centers, jails, group homes, residential treatment centers, and psychiatric hospitals. Most youth who are institutionalized are disconnected, so the youth disconnection rate in a rural area with a large prison can be quite high, for example.

As of 2022, approximately 5,200 youth and young adults ages 16 to 24 in Houston are institutionalized in various facilities including prisons, detention centers, jails, group homes, residential treatment centers, and psychiatric hospitals. Of these institutionalized young people, 86.5 percent (4,500 individuals) are considered disconnected. The rest (roughly 700 young people) are institutionalized but enrolled in educational programs. Disparities exist in educational opportunity, though; men incarcerated in Texas have the opportunity to earn a master's degree, while only bachelor's degrees are available to women.[45] Lack of financial support can also be a barrier to enrollment in these programs; Texas does not grant financial aid to individuals with felony or controlled substance convictions while they are incarcerated or for the two years following their release.[46] The 2020 stimulus package's restoration of PELL eligibility for incarcerated people may lessen the financial burden of college in prison programs in years to come.[47]

It is important to note the barriers to connection that previously incarcerated young people may face upon reentry.

While no incarcerated people in Houston are considered to be employed or in the labor market by US Census definitions, they are not exempted from labor during their incarceration. Throughout all correctional facilities in the state, there are approximately 121,200 incarcerated workers of all ages.[48] Despite this massive labor force, Texas is one of only seven states that does not pay incarcerated people for their labor.[49] In Brazoria County alone, there are five prison farms where incarcerated people are required to engage in agricultural labor without compensation at risk of losing commissary, recreation, and good-time credits related to work.[50]

It is important to note the barriers to connection that previously incarcerated young people may face upon reentry. Lack of proficiency in math and reading skills as well as requirements to disclose incarceration history on education, housing, and employment applications can all present challenges to connection upon reentry.[51]

Young Adults in the Justice System

In 2019, about 30 percent of institutionalized youth nationally were high school dropouts, six times the 5 percent rate for noninstitutionalized youth.[52] In 2022, 27.7 percent of youth newly admitted to the Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD) were eligible for special education, and a large majority—more than four in five—were below grade level in the categories of reading or math.[53] Lower rates

of educational proficiency and high school completion are obstacles to higher education and tend to lead to lower earnings, making it even harder for impacted youth to reconnect with school or work after incarceration.

In fiscal year 2023, there were 2,229 youth admitted to residential placement across Texas, according to the TJJD.[54] Despite thousands of youth engaging with the justice system every year, youth incarceration has, in fact, declined both nationally—dropping 77 percent from 107,500 youth in placement in 1999 to only 24,900 in 2021—and across Texas—a 66 percent drop from 8,000 youth to 2,700 over the same time period.[55] Still, the justice system has lasting impacts on those involved, especially when youth are transferred to the adult system when they are still children as young as 14.[56] In 2022 alone, 528 children between the ages of 10 and 16 were committed to TJJD; the 13-county Houston region contributed 104, or 19.7 percent, of those commitments.[57] Meanwhile in 2021, 590 youth under the age of 20 lived in the adult system, in prisons or state jails run by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.[58] Even if contact with the justice system does not culminate in a prison sentence, involvement in the system alone may still have other negative impacts, such as increasing likelihood to reoffend.[59]

Even if contact with the justice system does not culminate in a prison sentence, involvement in the system alone may still have other negative impacts, such as increasing likelihood to reoffend.

School discipline is one avenue through which many young adults become involved with the justice system, a process often referred to as the **school-to-prison pipeline**. This framework highlights how harsh disciplinary codes and aggressive disciplinary actions create a path of least resistance that moves students out of the classroom and into the justice system.[60] The Texas Education Code outlines policies for school "discipline, law and order," and this section is largely based on the Texas penal code, illustrating the adult-consequences tendency of school-age discipline. These policies as enforced can be overly harsh, often involving police in minor offenses or relying too heavily on suspension or expulsion. This disciplinarian approach has broad impact beyond discrete suspensions or expulsions. In the words of Brittney, a Texas high school student: "People I knew would drop out all the time because they had previously gotten in trouble and felt harassed by the police and didn't want to end up with something on their record, so they thought it was better to just stop going."[61]

Different groups of students are disproportionately affected by these policies. In the 2022–2023 school year, a striking **one in 10 students enrolled in public school in Texas** were subjected to suspension, expulsion, or placement in the Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program (JJAEP) or the Disciplinary Alternative Education Program (DAEP).[62] Hispanic students accounted for around half (50.8 percent) of all disciplinary action, consistent with their being around half (52.9 percent) of all enrolled students.[63] A noticeable disparity, however, existed between Black and white students. Though they made up only 12.8 percent of the student body, Black students represented 26.0 percent—about double the share—of disciplinary actions; on the other hand, white students accounted for 25.7 percent of all students, but 18.5 percent of disciplinary actions.[64]

These racial disparities persist beyond the classroom and are mirrored with alarming similarity in the carceral system. In 2020, Black youth ages 10 to 18 accounted for only 15 percent of the national population under juvenile court jurisdiction, yet they made up 35 percent of all delinquency cases.[65] Similar observations can be made at the state level—Black youth between ages 10 and 17 were overrepresented in the prison population, making up 37.9 percent of new admissions to TJJD in 2020 despite accounting for only 12.8 percent of the youth population in Texas; conversely, white youth were underrepresented, making up 19.5 percent of new TJJD admissions and 32.9 percent of the state youth population.[66]

Due in part to the level of disciplinary action some young people are met with before ending up in the carceral system, many enter the justice system already at an educational disadvantage. This lack of educational proficiency is also frequently compounded by a variety of other challenges: one common factor among youth in the justice system is adverse childhood experiences (ACES). In 2022, a majority of new admissions (59.6 percent) to TJJD had an incarcerated household member, and an even larger majority, 81.5 percent, had separated or divorced parents.[67] Having a parent, sibling, or other household member who is incarcerated can negatively impact young people's mental health, cause problems with delinquency, and increase likelihood of becoming incarcerated.[68]

One common factor among youth in the justice system is adverse childhood experiences (ACES).

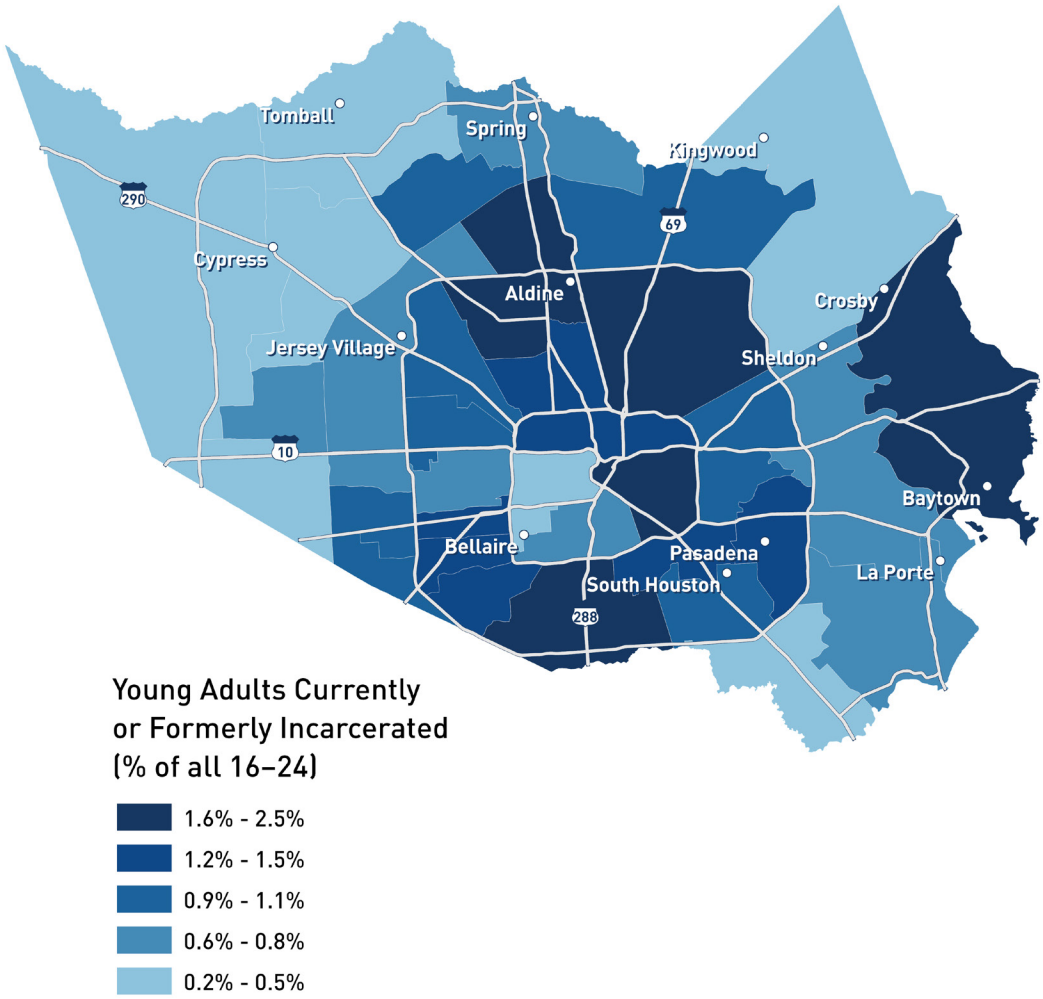
Measure of America conducted an analysis to map the neighborhood-level distribution of young people currently ages 16 to 24 that were charged as adults in the Harris County court system through the end of 2022. The underlying data were made available by the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition (TCJC); Harris County is one of the four large counties in Texas for which TCJC has obtained data. Unfortunately, this analysis isn't yet possible for the other 12 counties in the Greater Houston area. From 2015 to 2022, 7,091 young adults were sentenced in Harris County within the adult criminal justice system.

There is a strong neighborhood-level correlation between having a higher share of incarcerated young residents and a higher share of young adults who are not currently institutionalized and are disconnected from work and school.

To illustrate: East Aldine and the Eastex-Jensen Area has the highest rate of youth disconnection in Harris County, 23.6 percent. It also has the third-highest rate of youth incarceration, 1.9 percent. Aldine West, Acres Home, and Klein Far South as well as Westwood, Braeburn, and Meyerland have the second- and third-highest rates of youth disconnection in Harris County, respectively, and the fourth- and eighth-highest rates of youth incarceration. This pattern is repeated with low-incarceration neighborhoods also having low disconnection rates.

Incarceration and involvement with the justice system present young adults with a serious set of interlocking and compounding obstacles to connection to work and school. Focusing tailored services in these areas can help alleviate the challenges these young adults face and change the course of their lives. After

MAP 1 FORMERLY AND CURRENTLY INCARCERATED YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS IN HARRIS COUNTY, 2022



Source: Measure of America calculations from Harris County District Clerk data via Texas Criminal Justice Coalition, 2015–2022.

young people have served their time, they deserve the opportunity to pursue educational and career success like anyone else. **Criminal records should not consign young people to a lifetime spent on the margins of society.**

FIGURE 13 shows, for a selected group of characteristics that are relatively easily identifiable by service providers: what share of both the connected young person population and the disconnected young person population has that characteristic; a comparison of the prevalance of that characteristic in the disconnected and connected populations; and how many opportunity youth and young adults with that characteristic live in the Greater Houston area.

FIGURE 13 CHARACTERISTICS OF OPPORTUNITY YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS IN GREATER HOUSTON

CHARACTERISTIC	SHARE OF YOUTH WITH THIS CHARACTERISTIC (%)	SOMEONE WHO IS DISCONNECTED IS	OPPORTUNITY YOUTH IN GREATER HOUSTON (#)
Living in poverty	14.4 CONNECTED YOUTH 30.0 DISCONNECTED YOUTH	2.1 times as likely to live in a household below the poverty level	35,800
Has a disability	5.3 13.3	2.5 times as likely to have a disability	15,900
Young women with children*	6.2 28.2	4.5 times as likely to be a mother than other young women	17,000
Receives SNAP	14.2 24.6	1.7 times as likely to receive SNAP	29,400
Receives Medicaid	13.8 19.0	1.4 times as likely to receive Medicaid	22,700
No health insurance	24.6 45.9	1.9 times as likely to have no health insurance	54,800
Noncitizen	10.4 15.2	1.5 times as likely to be a noncitizen	18,100
No internet at home	4.0 8.0	2.0 times as likely to have no internet at home	9,600
No cars in household	3.4 6.0	1.8 times as likely to live in a household with no cars	7,200
No work experience in the last 5 years or ever	33.5 50.7	1.5 times as likely to have no work experience in the last 5 years or ever	60,500
Some college, no degree & not enrolled	7.6 17.1	2.3 times as likely to have left college before degree completion	20,400

Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2018–2022.
*Estimates indicate share of young women, rather than share of all youth.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF OPPORTUNITY IN GREATER HOUSTON

To present disconnection rates by neighborhood cluster, Measure of America uses geographic units called public use microdata areas (PUMAs). The Census Bureau defines the boundaries of PUMAs; they nest within states, comprise census tracts and counties, are almost always geographically contiguous, contain at least 100,000 people, and together cover the entirety of the United States. In urban areas, counties comprise one or more PUMAs; in rural areas, PUMAs generally comprise several contiguous counties. For instance, in Greater Houston, Austin, Colorado, Matagorda, Waller, and Wharton Counties are all part of one PUMA. The Greater Houston Area / 13 County Region consists of 57 PUMAs, which we condensed to 53 PUMAs that are harmonized across the geography changes that occurred after the 2020 Decennial Census. Neighborhood youth disconnection rates reflect the well-being of residents and the opportunities available in different communities. Maps for the indicators that follow can be seen starting on **PAGE 66**.

The highest youth disconnection rate, 23.6 percent, can be found in the East Aldine and Eastex-Jensen Area in northern Houston. Aldine is a Harris County suburb where over 60 percent of homes sustained damage from Hurricane Harvey in 2017.[63] The lowest youth disconnection rate, 5.8 percent, is in the Washington/Memorial Park, Montrose, the Astrodome, and Braeswood area, which is also home to the University of Houston, Rice University, and the Texas Medical Center. This area also encompasses many of Houston's parks and museums, among them Memorial Park, Hermann Park (including the Houston Zoo and Houston Museum of Natural Science), and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; it also includes the Third Ward neighborhood, a historically and culturally significant Black neighborhood undergoing gentrification. Based on Census data, we are unable to determine if long-term Third Ward residents are experiencing different youth outcomes distinct from the large number of students living nearby. Across the country, neighborhoods with large universities and student populations tend to have the lowest disconnection rates, but it's very difficult to disentangle these outcomes for student or temporary residents from those who have grown up in that same neighborhood.

Houston young person

ANALYSIS BY DEMOGRAPHIC GROUP

In order to obtain reliable data on neighborhood-level disaggregations of youth disconnection, we clustered communities together based on location and shared characteristics. This is most readily visible in the map section of this report (**APPENDIX A**). That said, the highest youth disconnection rate for girls and young

women, 21.2 percent, is in Westwood, Braeburn, and Meyerland, an area that is home to Houston Christian University. This is also the neighborhood with the largest neighborhood-level gender gap between female and male disconnection rates. In this same neighborhood, the male disconnection rate is 11.7 percent, and 62.3 percent of young adults are Hispanic. Across the Greater Houston area, neighborhoods where young women are significantly more likely than men to not be connected to work and school tend to be neighborhoods with a higher Hispanic share of the population. The lowest female disconnection rate sits at 7.0 percent in West and South Fort Bend County, which includes Katy, Hockley, Weston Lakes, and Brazos Bend State Park.

The highest youth disconnection rate for boys and young men, 19.3 percent, can be found in the Aldine and Eastex/Jensen area. As mentioned above, Aldine was among the areas in Harris County hit hardest by Hurricane Harvey. The lowest rate, 5.0 percent, is in the Uptown, Montrose, Texas Medical Center, West University Place, Midtown, and South Side area.

The highest disconnection rate for Asian 16- to 24-year-olds is 11.1 percent in an area of Houston west of Beltway 8 that includes Alief, Katy Southeast, and Eldridge/West Oaks. The lowest disconnection rate is 5.8 percent in central north Fort Bend County, an area including Sugar Land (the largest city in Fort Bend County), and Rosenberg. Note that these are the only geographies for which the Asian estimates are moderately reliable.

Disconnection rates vary widely within each racial and ethnic group, with high rates in some neighborhoods and low rates in others.

The highest disconnection rate for Black young people is 23.1 percent in North and East Houston, an area that includes downtown Houston. The lowest disconnection rate for Black 16- to 24-year-olds is 11.0 percent, surprisingly in the same part of the metro area where the Asian rate is highest—the area of Houston west of Beltway 8 that includes Alief, Katy Southeast, and Eldridge/West Oaks.

The highest disconnection rate for Hispanic youth is 19.3 percent in Sharpstown, Gulfton, Brays Oaks, and Bellaire. The lowest disconnection rate for Hispanic 16- to 24-year-olds is 7.0 percent in West and South Fort Bend County, and Katy City.

The highest youth disconnection rate for white young people is 19.0 percent in the cities of Pasadena, Channelview, Deer Park, and La Porte. The lowest, 4.2 percent, is found in West and South Fort Bend County, and Katy City.

ANALYSIS BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

The Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF) and Equal Measure developed a way of segmenting youth disconnection based on educational credentials into three categories that together comprise the entire opportunity youth and young adult population. The **high school disconnection rate** is the rate of people ages 16 to 24 without a high school diploma or GED who are not in school and not working. The **postsecondary disconnection rate** is the rate of young adults with a high school education who aren't enrolled in postsecondary institution and aren't working. The **workforce disconnection rate** is the rate of young adults with a postsecondary credential (associate degree, bachelor's degree, or advanced degree) who aren't working or enrolled in further education. All opportunity youth can be categorized into one of these three buckets, defined as they are by educational attainment. This provides another way to indentify gaps in the pipeline from education to career.

Some neighborhoods in Houston have high school and postsecondary disconnection rates more than three times as high as neighboring areas.

The neighborhood with the highest high school disconnection rate is in Sharpstown, Gulfton, Brays Oaks, and Bellaire: 16.2 percent of young adults without a high school diploma are out of school and out of work. The high school disconnection rate is dramatically lower in Brazoria County, where the high school disconnection rate is 4.6 percent. This measure reflects the percentage of young individuals who lack a high school diploma or GED and are neither employed nor connected to high school education.

Across the neighborhoods in the 13 County Region, Liberty and Chambers Counties and Kingwood, Bayton, and Crosby have the highest postsecondary disconnection rate at 22.7 percent. The lowest postsecondary disconnection rate is found in the Uptown, Montrose, Texas Medical Center, West University Place, Midtown, and South Side area, at just 6.1 percent. This neighborhood includes Rice University, the University of Houston, and Texas Southern University. This measure reflects the share of young adults who have completed high school but not yet a postsecondary credential who are out of school or out of work. It is not surprising that the rate would be low in a neighborhood where many college students reside.

The population that falls into the workforce disconnection bucket as defined by OYF (young adults with postsecondary credentials who are also out of school and work) is too small and geographically dispersed to enable reliable neighborhood-level analysis of this measure.

ANALYSIS BY POPULATION DENSITY

Local conditions and resources have a direct impact on the opportunities and obstacles young people face, and those living in rural areas typically face outsize challenges. Measure of America's *A Decade Undone* found that rural counties as a whole tend to have the highest rates of youth disconnection (18.1 percent) while suburban counties had the lowest (10.4 percent). For the 13 County Region, the most densely populated neighborhoods have—on the whole—the lowest disconnection rates (11.7 percent), followed by the least densely populated neighborhoods (12.1 percent). Medium-density or suburban neighborhoods in the Greater Houston area have the highest disconnection rate collectively, 13.9 percent. It important to emphasize that these are very narrow average gaps compared to the nationwide pattern, and they follow a slightly different definition of density; for more information, see **APPENDIX C**.

Local conditions and resources have a direct impact on the opportunities and obstacles young people face, and those living in rural areas typically face outsize challenges.

In the 13 County Region, disconnection is not primarily an urban, suburban, or rural problem. Neighborhoods in each category provide a wide range of opportunity available to the young adults who live there. The share of young adults who are out of school and out of work in low-population-density areas ranges from 6.5 percent (western and southern Fort Bend County) to 20.9 percent (Liberty and Chambers Counties). In medium-density areas, neighborhood-level youth disconnection rates run from 6.5 percent (Sugar Land and Stafford in northeast Fort Bend County) to 23.6 percent (the East Aldine and Eastex-Jensen Area in northern Houston). In high-density Greater Houston, youth disconnection varies from 5.8 percent (Washington/Memorial Park, Montrose, the Astrodome, and Braeswood, home to the University of Houston, Rice University, and the Texas Medical Center) to 20.0 percent (Westwood, Braeburn, and Meyerland). For more details, see **TABLE 3** and **MAPS 4** and **5**.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1 DIRECT RESOURCES AND ATTENTION TOWARD THE GROUPS AND PLACES WITH THE HIGHEST DISCONNECTION RATES

2 CONNECT YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS TO THE LABOR MARKET

3 PRIORITIZE PREVENTION

4 REDUCE DISCONNECTION RISK BY INVESTING IN CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

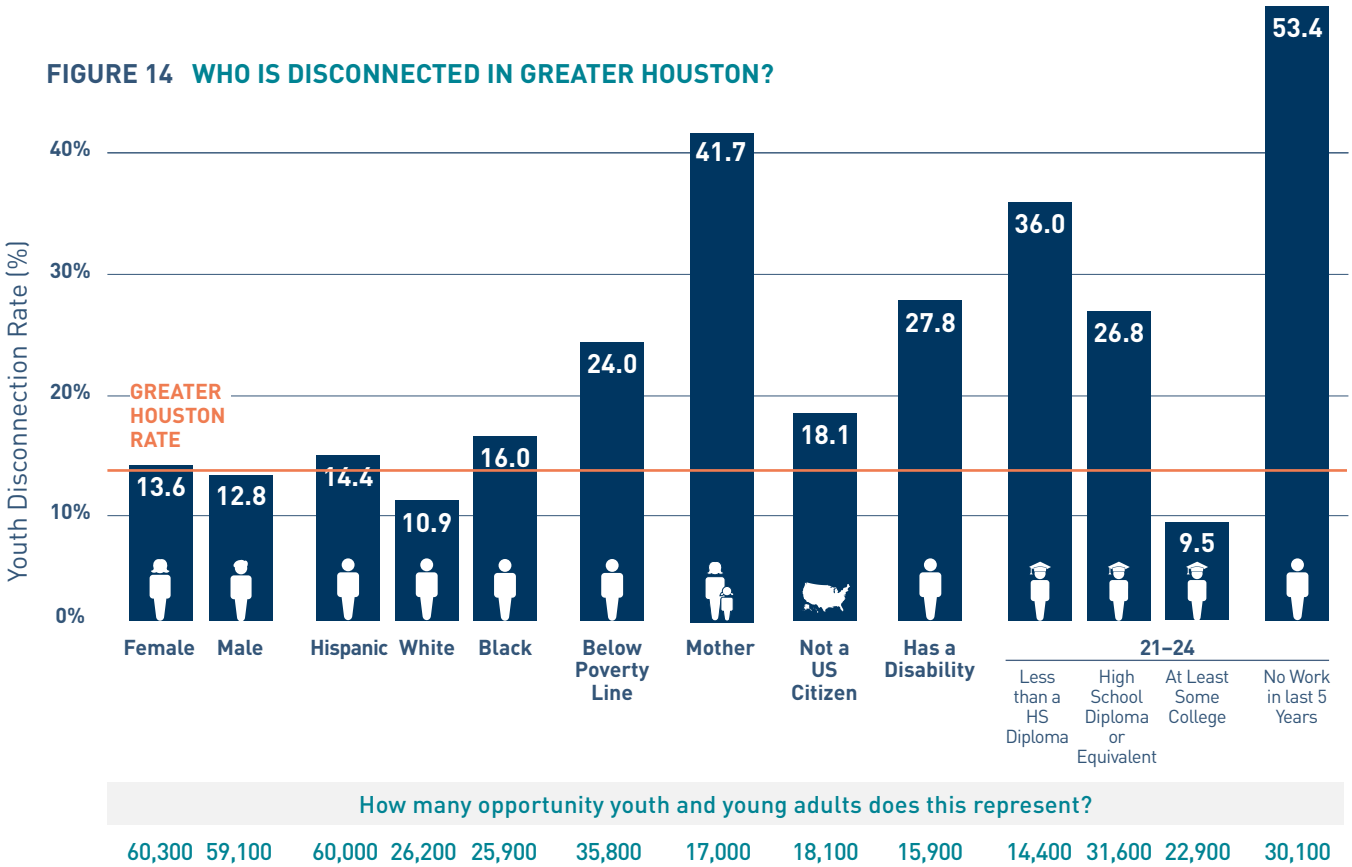
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The development of this report was guided by a panel of knowledgeable, passionate advisors deeply committed to Houston and who call the city home (see the acknowledgments on **PAGE 3**). This group worked together with the Measure of America team to identify a set of priority action areas, listed below, necessary to ensure a future in which all Greater Houston's residents can flourish.

Greater Houston is filled with people—teachers, nonprofit leaders, public servants, community organizers, and others—who are working tirelessly every day to improve life in their communities. What is often lacking is sufficient resources so that these efforts can be improved, expanded, and coordinated. Below we offer some recommendations to direct resources in a way to ensure that all the region's young people are plugged in to the community, health, school, training, childcare, transportation, and employment resources they need to transition to thriving adulthoods.

Addressing youth disconnection is a high-leverage way to reduce intergenerational poverty and to improve living conditions in the long run.

FIGURE 14 WHO IS DISCONNECTED IN GREATER HOUSTON?



Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2018–2022.

1 DIRECT RESOURCES AND ATTENTION TOWARD THE GROUPS AND PLACES WITH THE HIGHEST DISCONNECTION RATES

One purpose of reports like this one is to identify demographic groups and specific neighborhoods with high shares of youth and young adults who are not in school and not working with a view to better targeting assistance. Of the groups addressed in this study, 21- to 24-year-olds who last worked more than five years ago or never (53.4 percent, 30,100 individuals), young mothers (41.7 percent, 17,000 individuals), and 21- to 24-year-olds with less than a high school diploma (36.0 percent, 14,400 individuals) had some of the highest disconnection rates—more than triple the region-wide average.

In addition, several geographic areas have an unusually high share of young people who are neither working nor in school: the **Aldine and Eastex-Jensen Area**, **North Houston and Woodgate**, **Liberty and Chambers Counties**, as well as **Braeburn and Westwood**. In each of these places, the youth disconnection rate is 20 percent or more. Many neighborhoods would benefit from additional investment, but these stand out. Greater investment in **community-level support organizations** is needed in these neighborhoods and throughout Greater Houston in order to reach young people who drop out of school and are not well served by standard institutional supports designed to keep young adults on track.

2 CONNECT YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS TO THE LABOR MARKET

Across Greater Houston, 50.7 percent of opportunity youth and young adults have not worked in the past five years: 60,500 young people. The barrier to entry for jobs that pay well enough to support a family is higher than it has been in the past. To address this, **expanding targeted employment and training programs** is key, especially for those who are on the older end of the 16- to 24-year-old range, without high school diplomas, and without recent work experience. Such initiatives should focus on providing practical work experience (perhaps through expanded apprenticeship and work-based learning programs), bridging educational gaps, and revitalizing hope in discouraged job-seekers. This is particularly crucial for the 21- to 24-year-olds who haven't worked in the last five years and have strikingly high rates of disconnection; they constitute one in four disconnected youth across the region.

3 PRIORITIZE PREVENTION

It is easier to keep young people in high school and on a clear pathway to well-defined postsecondary options than to try to reach them after they have left school without a degree, failed to transition to workforce and technical education programs or college after high school, or experienced long bouts of unemployment. The following are important priorities:

Prioritize high school completion. In Greater Houston, 10.0 percent of adults ages 21 to 24 lack a high school diploma, in contrast to 8.2 percent statewide. Young adults who do not complete high school face substantial challenges. By their early 20s, a staggering 36.0 percent are neither employed nor attending school. Initiatives that enable schools to identify and address early warning signs of dropout, like high rates of absenteeism; encourage and support struggling students to make it to the finish line of high school graduation; and provide easy-to-access chances to finish high school following periods of disconnection are crucial. School districts around the country—and many of those in Greater Houston—must also do more to address persistent Covid-19-linked learning loss, which will have implications for high school completion and career success without targeted, well-designed interventions. Other critical measures to keep youth connected include developing a system with robust and accessible school-to-work alternatives; providing wraparound counseling, career mentoring, remedial learning, and other support for at-risk youth; and fostering positive school climates characterized by sensitivity to cultural differences and feelings of connectedness and belonging.

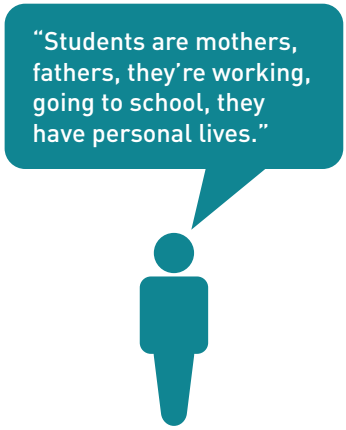
Young people need programs and support in high school and in their communities that help them figure out and take their next step.

Plan around what comes after high school. High school completion is a necessary but not sufficient step for a flourishing adulthood: 25 percent of youth in Houston with a high school diploma but no further education are disconnected. Young people need programs and support in high school and in their communities that help them figure out and take their next step, whether that means workforce and technical training, volunteer or employment opportunities to build on professional skills, or college application guidance. Special emphasis should be placed on ensuring continuing support for students not heading directly to college; building pipelines to college is a necessary component of youth reengagement but not a silver bullet. Strong evidence shows that providing community college students with a wide range of **comprehensive supports**—such as counseling, tutoring, and financial assistance—can increase enrollment and improve graduation rates.[70]

Maintain a focus on young people in poverty. The intertwined nature of poverty and disconnection is evident, and strategies to mitigate poverty and its ensuing challenges can minimize disconnection. Disconnection rates are particularly high among youth beneficiaries of Medicaid or SNAP, both proxies for severe poverty. Organizations that are already in touch with Medicaid or SNAP beneficiaries are well placed to identify and reengage young people and families. Addressing youth disconnection is a high-leverage way to reduce intergenerational poverty and to improve living conditions in the long run.

Support youth with disabilities and the mental health of all youth. With the proper support, many young people with disabilities can succeed in school and have fulfilling careers. Due to the increase in youth with disabilities following Covid-19, it is essential to ensure that the needs of this group are not overlooked in designing interventions. Keep the "whole person" in mind when designing interventions—mental health should be taken into account.

Support programs and policies that enable young mothers to pursue their educational and career goals. In Greater Houston, 41.7 percent of young mothers (17,000 individuals) are not working or in school, four times the rate among young women without children. Once a young woman becomes a mother, joining or reconnecting to the labor market becomes more difficult. It is critical to engage with disconnected mothers to understand their needs, whether it's evening courses, affordable childcare, or flexible working hours. To support their employment, special emphasis should be placed on preparing young women for better-paying, often male-dominated, fields—and ensuring that they have pathways to industries that supply a greater share of jobs that don't require advanced degrees, such as the construction, manufacturing, and transportation and warehousing industries. Industry gender balances are not set in stone; for instance, women once dominated the field of computer programming.[71]



Houston young person

4 REDUCE DISCONNECTION RISK BY INVESTING IN CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Disconnection doesn't happen overnight; unless precipitated by a sudden crisis, such as the onset of a severe mental illness or a death in the family, the process of becoming disconnected from school and work tends to be years in the making. Reducing disconnection requires building strong and positive links between children and their families and the education system from the earliest years. Helping young parents living in poverty or facing other kinds of challenges to ensure that their children get a good start is key; proven parent-support programs like the Nurse-Family Partnership should be expanded. The expert consensus is that a high-quality preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds, particularly for disadvantaged children, is one of the most worthwhile interventions available; it should be universal. 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 in school and 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.[72] Another clear investment priority is high-quality K–8 schooling. Children growing up in disadvantaged circumstances need schools with the expertise and resources to provide excellent 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 like failing a core academic subject, repeating a grade, or missing more than 10 percent of school days.

In addition to these steps, above all, at-risk youth need the kind of support from communities and institutions that other young people take for granted: safe places to live and food on the table; caring adults to help them navigate the often-bewildering transition from childhood to adulthood; opportunities to try new things, to fail, and to try again; and experiences that build self-knowledge, agency, and confidence as well as hard and soft skills. They need society to give them what it gives more fortunate young people, not just "a" chance, but many chances.

APPENDICES & ENDNOTES

APPENDICES

A: INDICATOR TABLES AND MAPS
B: GLOSSARY
C: METHODOLOGICAL NOTE
D: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

ENDNOTES

APPENDIX A: INDICATOR TABLES AND MAPS

TABLE 1 CHARACTERISTICS OF OPPORTUNITY YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS IN GREATER HOUSTON

ONE-YEAR ESTIMATES	YOUTH DISCONNECTION (% of each group that is disconnected)	OPPORTUNITY YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS (#)
United States	10.9	4,343,600
Texas	12.5	485,600
Houston	13.3	124,500
FIVE-YEAR ESTIMATES		
GENDER		
Female	13.6	60,300
Male	12.8	59,100
AGE GROUP		
16–18	5.8	18,600
19–21	16.7	47,300
22–24	17.7	53,500
RACE		
Asian	7.1	4,200
Black	16.0	25,900
Hispanic/Latino	14.4	60,000
Two or More or Other Races	11.6	3,200
White	10.9	26,200
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT		
Less Than HS Diploma	9.6	30,800
HS Diploma or Equivalent	24.8	59,300
Some College, No Degree	8.8	20,400
Associate Degree	6.4	2,400
Bachelor's Degree or Higher	8.6	6,500
MARRIAGE		
Married	26.4	16,100
Not Married	12.2	103,300
MOTHERHOOD		
Mothers	41.7	17,000
Not Mothers	10.8	43,300

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TABLE 1 CHARACTERISTICS OF OPPORTUNITY YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS IN GREATER HOUSTON

FIVE-YEAR ESTIMATES	YOUTH DISCONNECTION (%)	OPPORTUNITY YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS (#)
DISABILITY		
Has a Disability	27.8	15,900
Does Not Have a Disability	12.2	103,500
HEALTH INSURANCE		
Uninsured	22.1	54,800
Has Public Health Insurance	17.3	22,700
Has Private Health Insurance	8.0	41,900
POVERTY		
Below Poverty Line	24.0	35,800
At or above Poverty Line	10.8	79,100
LAST WORKED		
Worked in the Past Year	6.5	34,100
1–5 Years Ago	46.1	24,800
>5 Years Ago or Never	18.7	60,500
SNAP BENEFITS		
Receiving SNAP Benefits	20.9	29,400
Not Receiving Snap Benefits	11.8	90,000
INSTITUTIONALIZED		
Institutionalized	86.8	4,500
Not Institutionalized	12.8	114,900

Sources: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2022, 2018–2022.
Note: Numbers do not sum to the 1-year estimates because the 5-year estimates have a smaller overall average population than 2022; the population in Greater Houston has grown over time. Population counts may not sum to group totals due to rounding.

TABLE 2 CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUTH DISCONNECTION IN GREATER HOUSTON OVER TIME

ONE-YEAR ESTIMATES	2017 YOUTH DISCONNECTION (%)	2022 YOUTH DISCONNECTION (%)
United States	11.5	10.9
Texas	13.1	12.5
Greater Houston / The 13 County Region	13.1	13.3
FIVE-YEAR ESTIMATES		
GENDER		
Female*	14.9	13.6
Male	12.3	12.8
AGE GROUP		
16–18	5.4	5.8
19–21	17.8	16.7
22–24	18.2	17.7
RACE		
Asian	7.1	7.1
Black	15.9	16.0
Hispanic/Latino	14.9	14.4
Two or More or Other Races	11.2	11.6
White	11.6	10.9
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT (among 21–24 year olds)		
Less Than HS Diploma	35.4	36.0
HS Diploma or Equivalent*	29.7	26.8
Some College, No Degree	9.3	9.5
MARRIAGE		
Married	27.3	26.4
Not Married	12.4	12.2
MOTHERHOOD (among girls and young women)		
Mothers	38.2	41.7
Not Mothers*	11.4	10.8
DISABILITY		
Has a Disability	30.8	27.8
Does Not Have a Disability	12.6	12.2

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TABLE 2 CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUTH DISCONNECTION IN GREATER HOUSTON OVER TIME

FIVE-YEAR ESTIMATES	2017 YOUTH DISCONNECTION (%)	2022 YOUTH DISCONNECTION (%)
HEALTH INSURANCE		
Uninsured	22.5	22.1
Has Public Health Insurance*	19.9	17.3
Has Private Health Insurance	7.9	8.0
POVERTY		
Below Poverty Line	24.3	24.0
At or above Poverty Line	11.0	10.8
LAST WORKED		
Worked in the Past Year*	7.6	6.5
1–5 Years Ago*	47.9	46.1
>5 Years Ago or Never	18.3	18.7
SNAP BENEFITS		
Receiving SNAP Benefits*	23.2	20.9
Not Receiving Snap Benefits	11.7	11.8

*Indicates a statistically significant difference in the disconnection rate over time.
Sources: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2017, 2022, 2013–2017, 2018–2022.

TABLE 3 OPPORTUNITY YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS BY GEOGRAPHY IN GREATER HOUSTON

GEOGRAPHY	YOUTH DISCONNECTION (%)	OPPORTUNITY YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS (#)
Austin, Colorado, Matagorda, Waller, and Wharton Counties	11.3	3,100
Brazoria County	12.4	5,300
Lake Jackson & Brazoria County (Southwest)	14.1	1,700
Alvin City & Brazoria County (Central)	13.8	2,300
Pearland & Brazoria County (North)	9.5	1,400
Fort Bend County	8.7	8,500
Missouri City & Fort Bend County (East)	14.7	2,100
Rosenberg City, Pecan Grove, & New Territory	11.6	1,700
Mission Bend, Cinco Ranch, & Four Corners	7.4	1,700
Fort Bend County (West and South)	6.5	1,900
Sugar Land & Stafford	6.5	1,000
Galveston County	10.1	4,100
Galveston, Texas City, & La Marque	11.7	2,500
League City & Friendswood	8.3	1,600
Harris County	13.7	81,300
East Aldine & Eastex-Jensen Area	23.6	3,400
Aldine West, Acres Home, & Klein Far South	20.9	3,300
Westwood, Braeburn, & Meyerland	20.0	2,600
East Little York/Homestead, Sheldon, & East Houston	19.2	3,100
Downtown, Second Ward, & Pecan Park	18.8	2,400
Sharpstown & Gulfton	17.7	3,000
Five Corners, Minnetex, & Golfcrest/Bellfort/Reveille	17.7	5,500
Klein West & Tomball	17.5	2,900
Northshore, Galena Park, & Cloverleaf	16.2	2,800
Northside & Oak Forest	16.0	2,700
Spring Branch	15.7	2,100
Northwest Houston & Carverdale/Westbranch	15.1	2,300
Baytown & Barrett	15.0	2,200
Spring Southwest, Greenspoint, & Aldine Northwest	14.6	2,900
Pasadena	14.6	2,400
Spring & Klein East	14.2	2,400
Channelview & La Porte/Shoreacres	13.9	2,300

Note: Data are for noninstitutionalized youth population, which avoids distortions caused by the presence of correctional facilities or mental hospitals. County totals may differ from the sum of their constituent parts due to rounding.
Sources: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2018–2022.

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TABLE 3 OPPORTUNITY YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS BY GEOGRAPHY IN GREATER HOUSTON

GEOGRAPHY	YOUTH DISCONNECTION (%)	OPPORTUNITY YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS (#)
Harris County (Continued)	13.7	81,300
Alief	13.7	2,200
Atascocita, IAH, & Humble	13.7	2,400
Champions & Cypress Creek Central/Cypress Creek North	13.6	2,000
Heights, Near Northside, & Denver Harbor/Port Houston	13.3	1,500
Hobby & Edgebrook	13.2	2,200
Copperfield	12.9	1,800
Spring Branch West, Eldridge North, & Memorial	12.2	1,500
Cypress North, Cypress Creek South, & Willowbrook	11.9	1,800
Jersey Village & Klein South	11.9	2,000
Brays Oaks, Westbury, & Willows Meadows	11.7	1,600
Clear Lake & Seabrook	11.7	1,500
Katy Southeast & Mission Bend: Harris	11.5	1,400
Lake Houston, Crosby, & Kingwood	10.7	1,500
Katy North & Bear Creek	10.3	1,500
South Belt/Ellington & Friendswood: Harris	10.0	1,500
Eldridge/West Oaks & Westchase	9.6	1,600
Uptown & Memorial Villages	7.4	800
Hockley, Cypress South, & Katy: Harris	7.3	1,600
Washington/Memorial Park, Montrose, Astrodome, & Braeswood	5.8	2,500
Liberty & Chambers Counties	20.9	3,300
Montgomery County	10.4	7,600
Montgomery County (West) & Conroe City (West)	11.5	2,300
Montgomery County (North) & Conroe City (East)	11.3	2,400
Montgomery County (Southwest) & The Woodlands	11.0	1,400
Montgomery County (Southeast)	8.0	1,500
Walker County	16.0	1,700

Note: Data are for noninstitutionalized youth population, which avoids distortions caused by the presence of correctional facilities or mental hospitals. County totals may differ from the sum of their constituent parts due to rounding.
Sources: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2018–2022.

TABLE 4 GREATER HOUSTON DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE FOR AGES 16–24, 2013–2017 TO 2018–2022

YEAR	CATEGORY	2013–2017 TOTAL YOUTH (#)	2018–2022 TOTAL YOUTH (#)	PERCENT CHANGE SINCE 2013–2017
Greater Houston				
	All Youth Ages 16–24	837,300	905,600	8.2
GENDER				
	Female	407,900	443,100	8.6
	Male	429,500	462,500	7.7
RACE/ETHNICITY				
	Asian	50,800	58,700	15.6
	Black	159,200	161,200	1.3
	Hispanic/Latino	360,000	417,700	16.0
	Two or More or Other	18,200	27,500	51.1
	White	249,100	240,600	–3.4
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT				
	Less Than HS Diploma	303,900	320,000	5.3
	HS Diploma or Equivalent	210,400	239,100	13.6
	Some College, No Degree; Associate Degree, Bachelor's Degree, or Postsecondary Degree	323,100	346,600	7.3
	Some College, No Degree	239,900	232,600	–3.0
	Associate, Bachelor's, or Postsecondary Degree	83,200	114,000	37.0
AGE				
	16–18	294,100	320,400	8.9
	19–21	260,600	282,600	8.4
	22–24	282,600	302,600	7.1
MARRIAGE				
	Married	63,800	60,900	–4.5
	Not Married	773,500	844,800	9.2
Mothers				
	Women who are mothers	53,200	40,900	–23.1
	Women who are not mothers	354,600	402,200	13.4
Disability				
	Does not have a disability	793,900	848,500	6.9
	Has a disability	43,400	57,200	31.8

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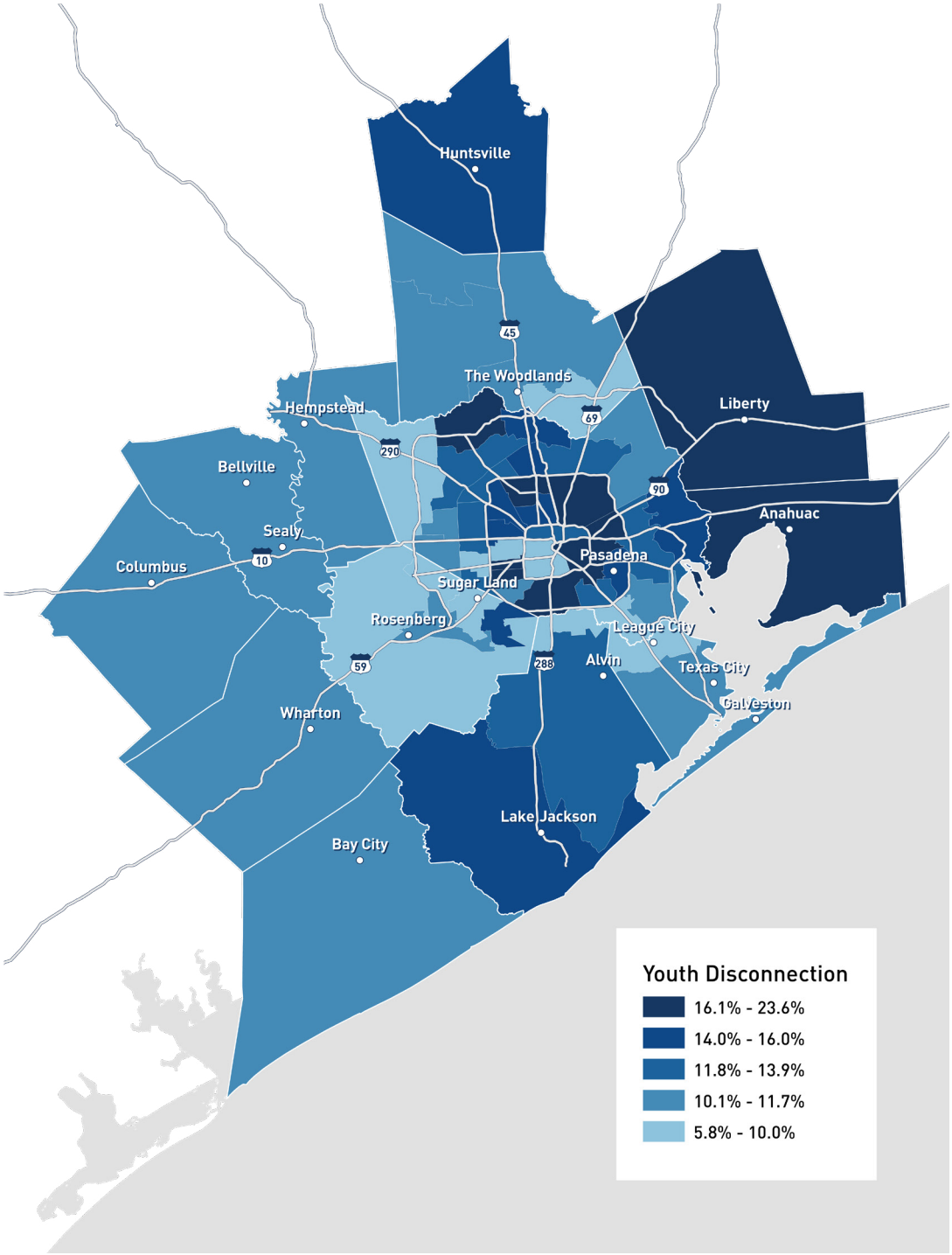
TABLE 4 GREATER HOUSTON DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE FOR AGES 16–24, 2013–2017 TO 2018–2022

YEAR	CATEGORY	2013–2017 TOTAL YOUTH (#)	2018–2022 TOTAL YOUTH (#)	PERCENT CHANGE SINCE 2016
HEALTH INSURANCE				
	Has Private Health Insurance	491,600	526,300	7.1
	Has Public Health Insurance	112,300	131,400	17.0
	Uninsured	233,400	248,000	6.3
POVERTY				
	Below the Poverty Line	145,900	148,900	2.1
	At or above the Poverty Line	666,000	731,800	9.9
INSTITUTIONALIZED				
	Institutionalized	6,000	5,200	–13.3
	Not Institutionalized	831,300	900,400	8.3
MILITARY STATUS				
	Civilian	831,700	900,200	8.2
	On Active Duty	500	1,100	120.0
	Veteran	5,100	4,300	–15.7

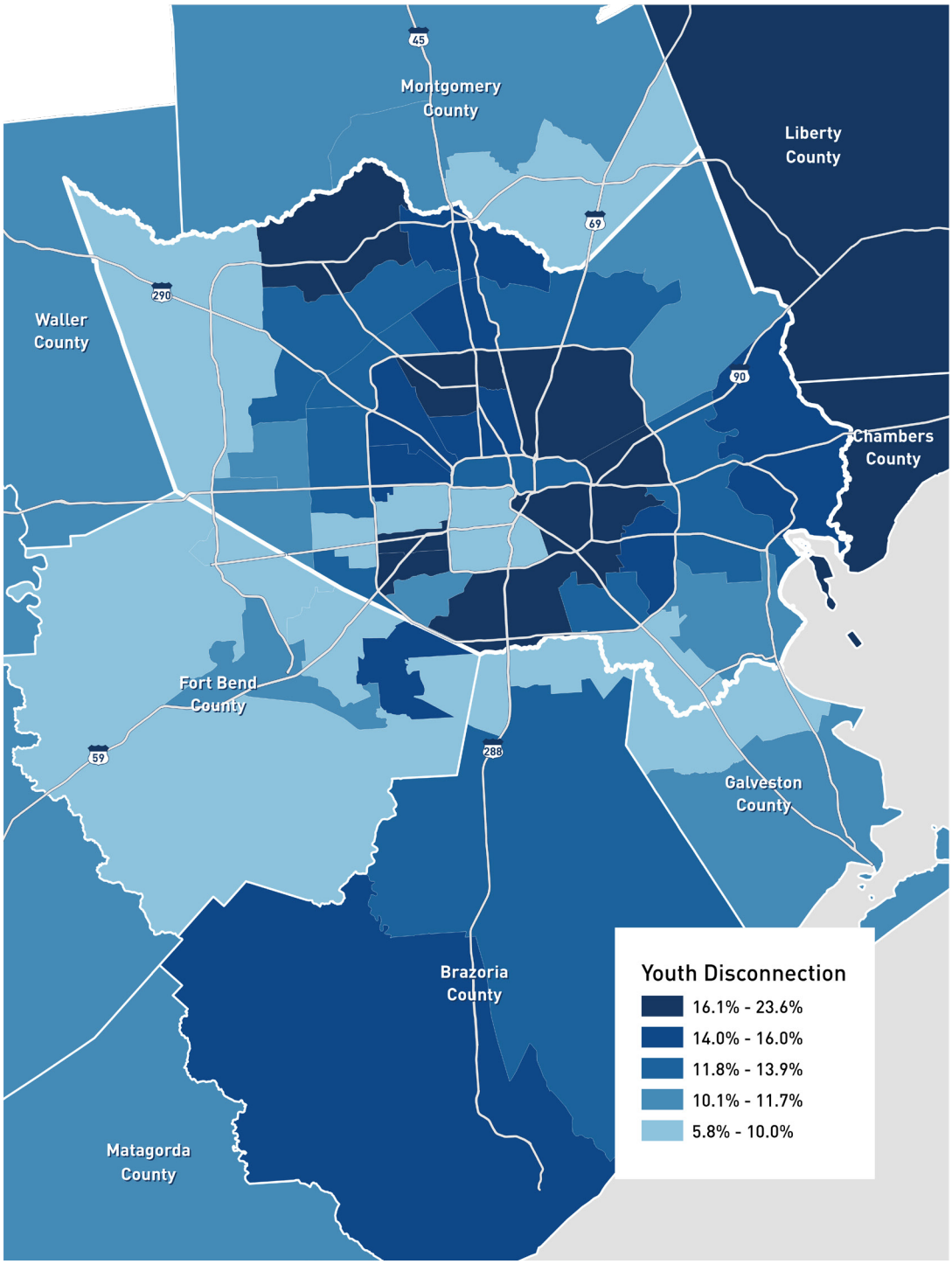
Sources:Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2013–2017, 2018–2022.

MAP 2 YOUTH DISCONNECTION IN THE GREATER HOUSTON AREA BY NEIGHBORHOOD CLUSTER



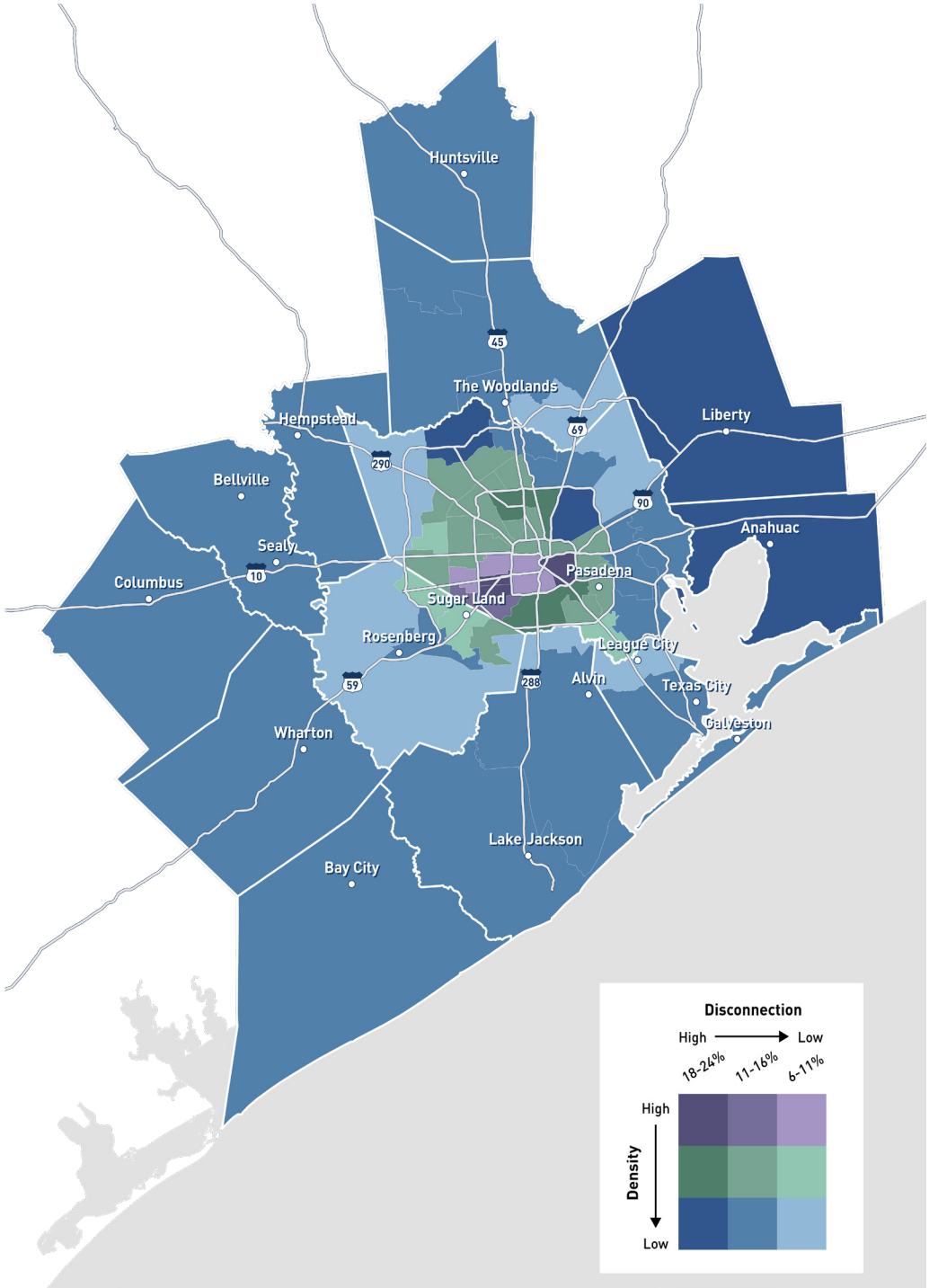
Source: Measure of America analysis of 2018–2022 ACS data from the US Census Bureau. Data are for noninstitutionalized youth.

MAP 3 YOUTH DISCONNECTION IN THE HARRIS COUNTY AREA BY NEIGHBORHOOD CLUSTER



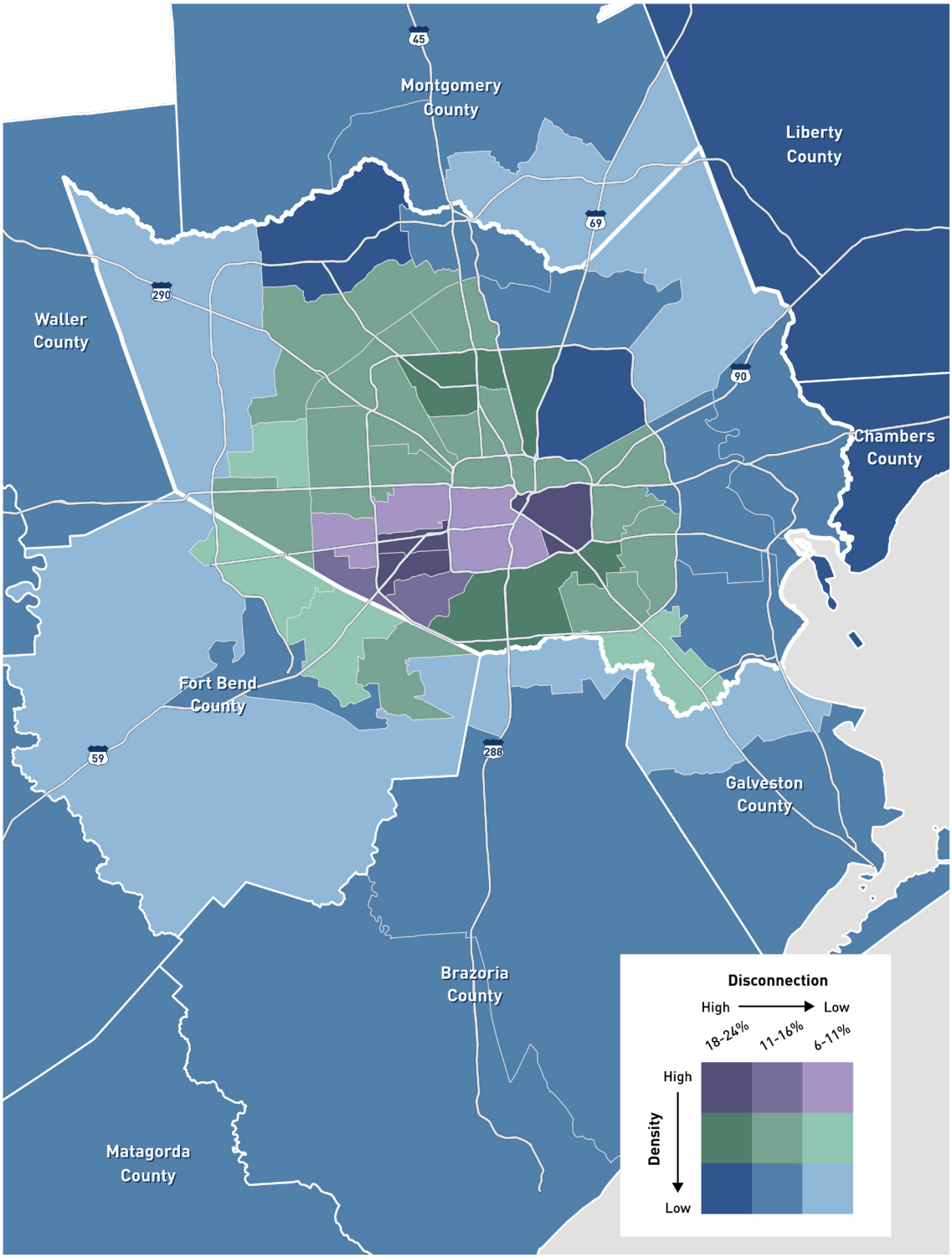
Source: Measure of America analysis of 2018–2022 ACS data from the US Census Bureau. Data are for noninstitutionalized youth.

MAP 4 YOUTH DISCONNECTION IN THE GREATER HOUSTON AREA BY DENSITY AND NEIGHBORHOOD



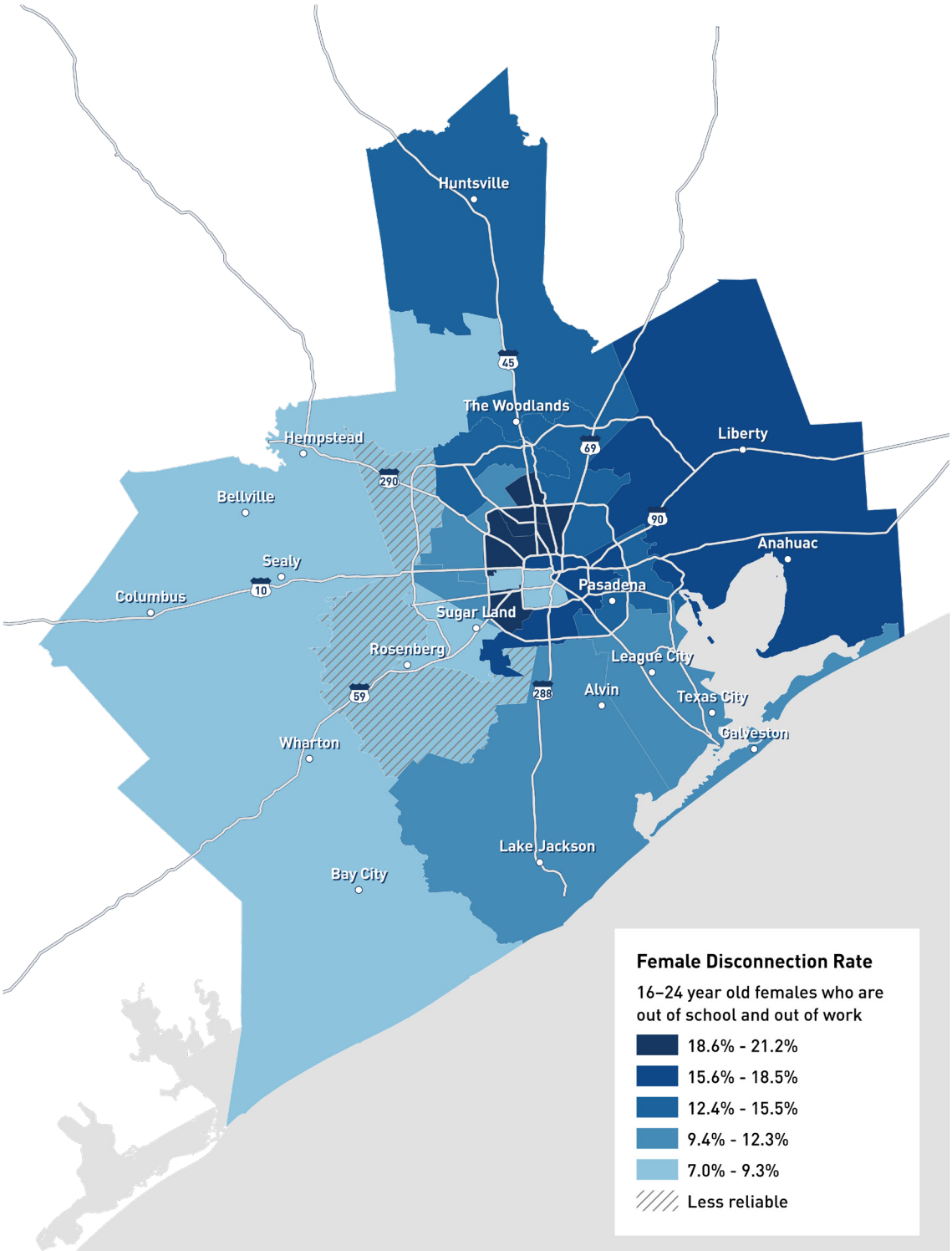
Source: Measure of America analysis of 2018–2022 ACS data from the US Census Bureau and IPUMS 2021. Data are for noninstitutionalized youth.

MAP 5 YOUTH DISCONNECTION IN THE HARRIS COUNTY AREA BY DENSITY AND NEIGHBORHOOD



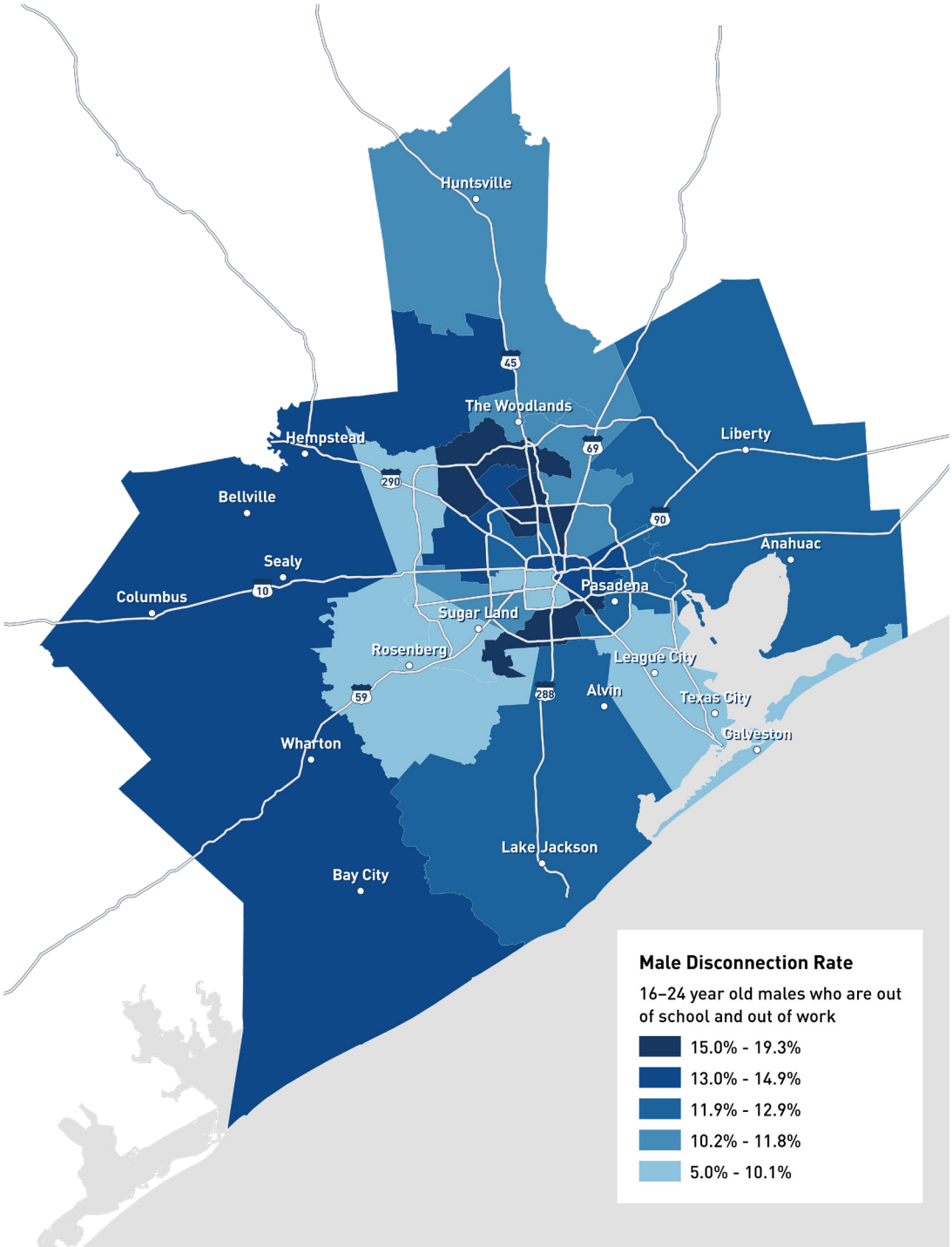
Source: Measure of America analysis of 2018–2022 ACS data from the US Census Bureau and IPUMS 2021. Data are for noninstitutionalized youth.

MAP 6 FEMALE YOUTH DISCONNECTION IN THE GREATER HOUSTON AREA BY NEIGHBORHOOD CLUSTER



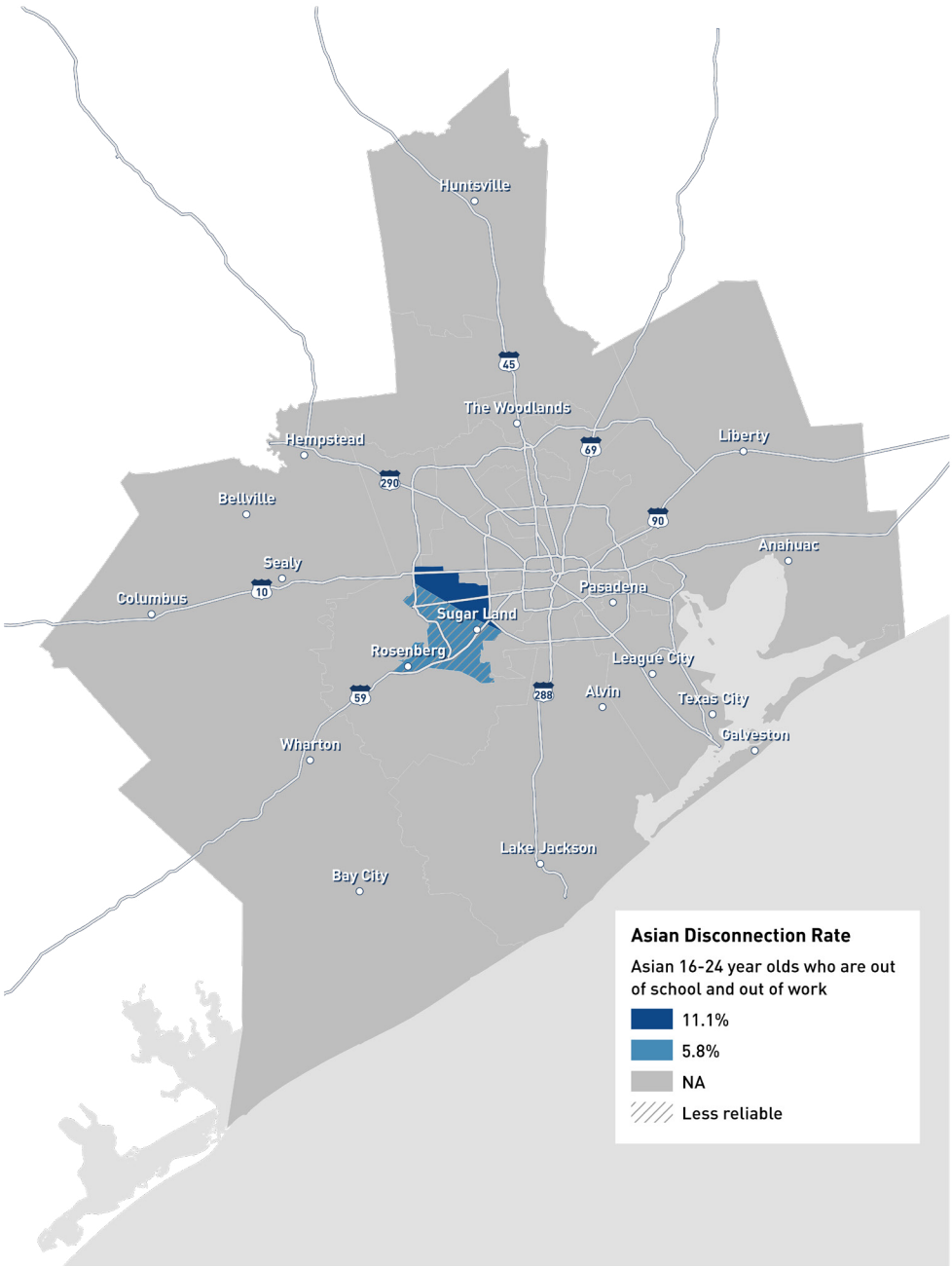
Source: Measure of America analysis of 2018–2022 ACS data from the US Census Bureau. Data are for noninstitutionalized youth.

MAP 7 MALE YOUTH DISCONNECTION IN THE GREATER HOUSTON AREA BY NEIGHBORHOOD CLUSTER



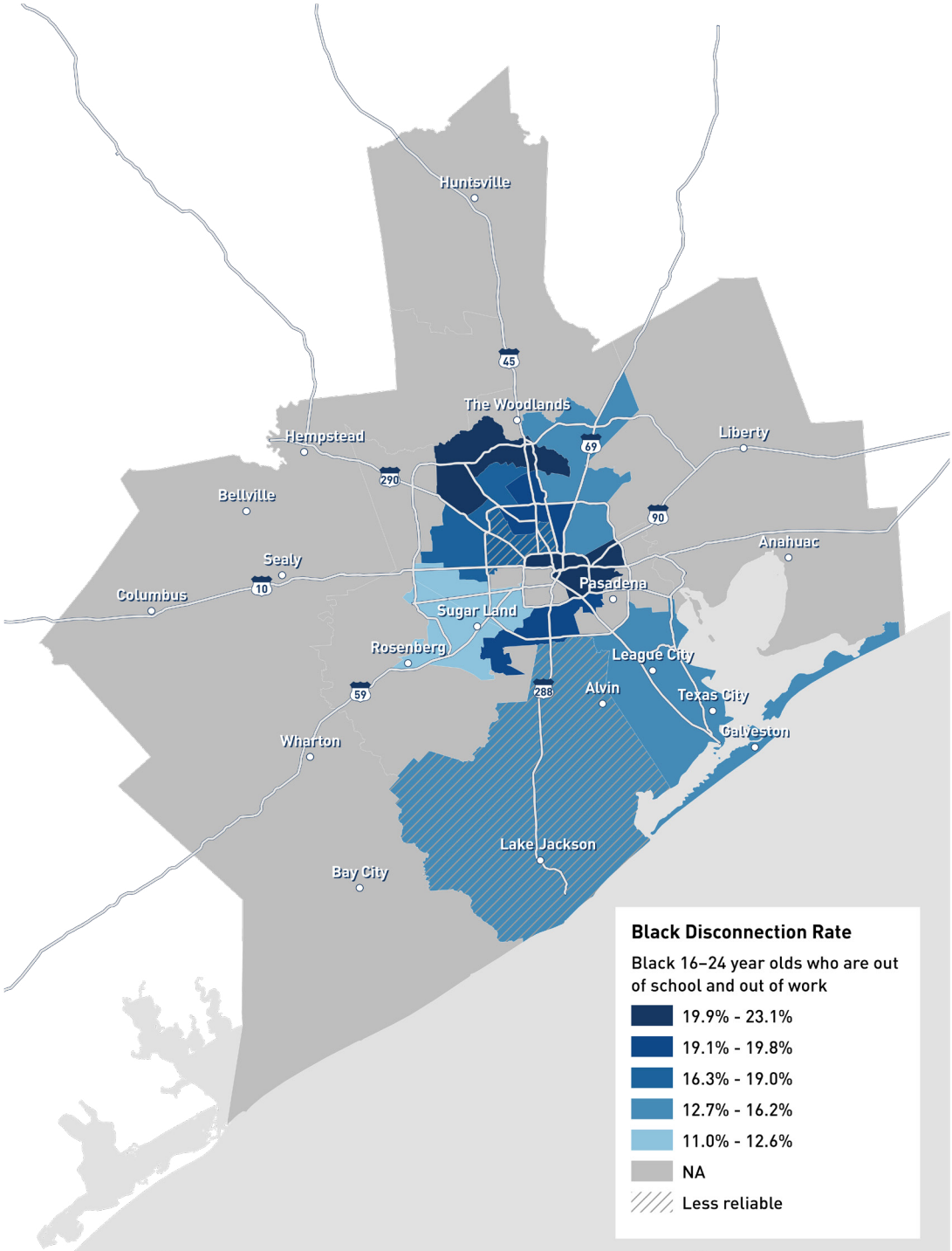
Source: Measure of America analysis of 2018–2022 ACS data from the US Census Bureau. Data are for noninstitutionalized youth.

MAP 8 ASIAN YOUTH DISCONNECTION IN THE GREATER HOUSTON AREA BY NEIGHBORHOOD CLUSTER



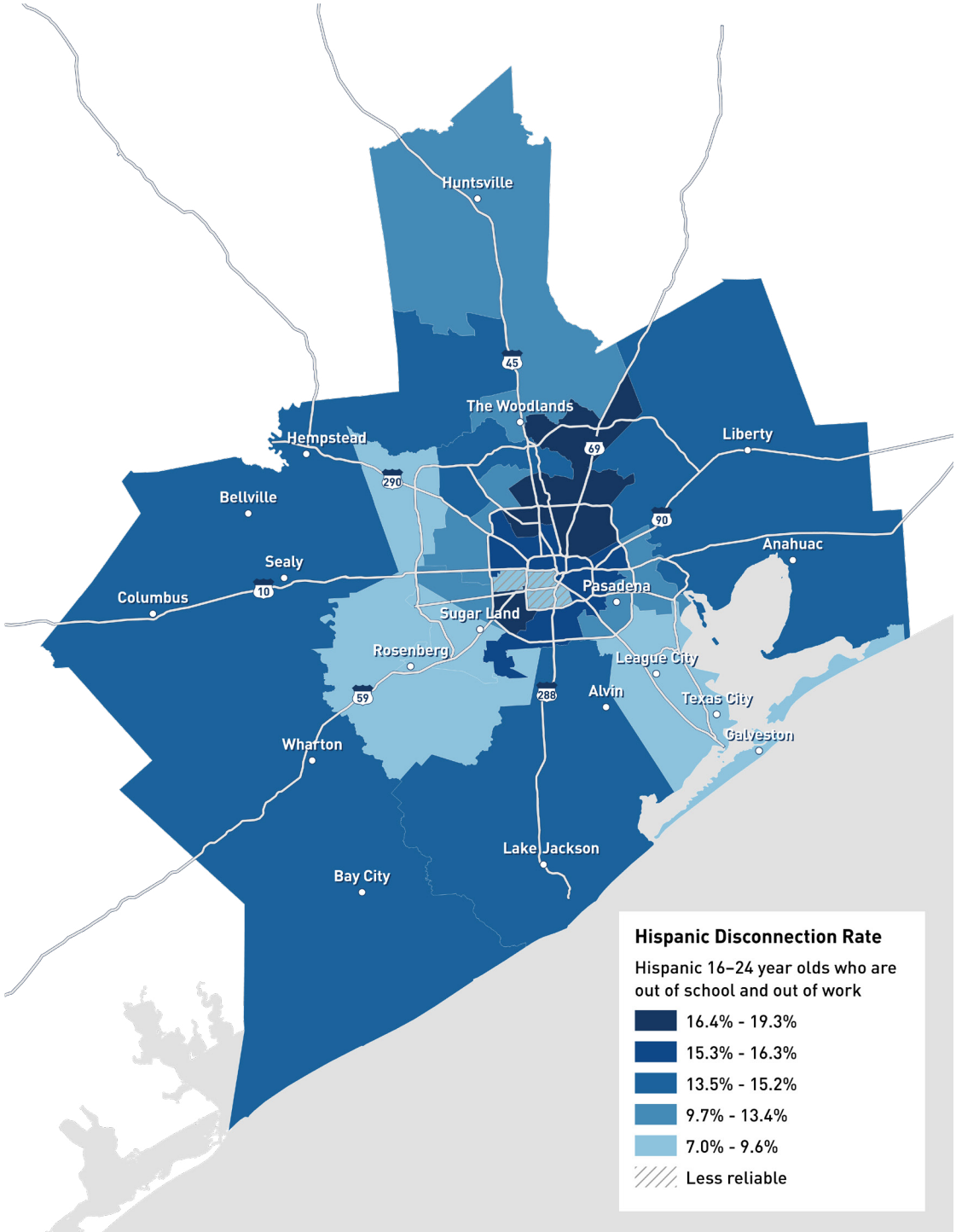
Source: Measure of America analysis of 2018–2022 ACS data from the US Census Bureau. Data are for noninstitutionalized youth.

MAP 9 BLACK YOUTH DISCONNECTION IN THE GREATER HOUSTON AREA BY NEIGHBORHOOD CLUSTER



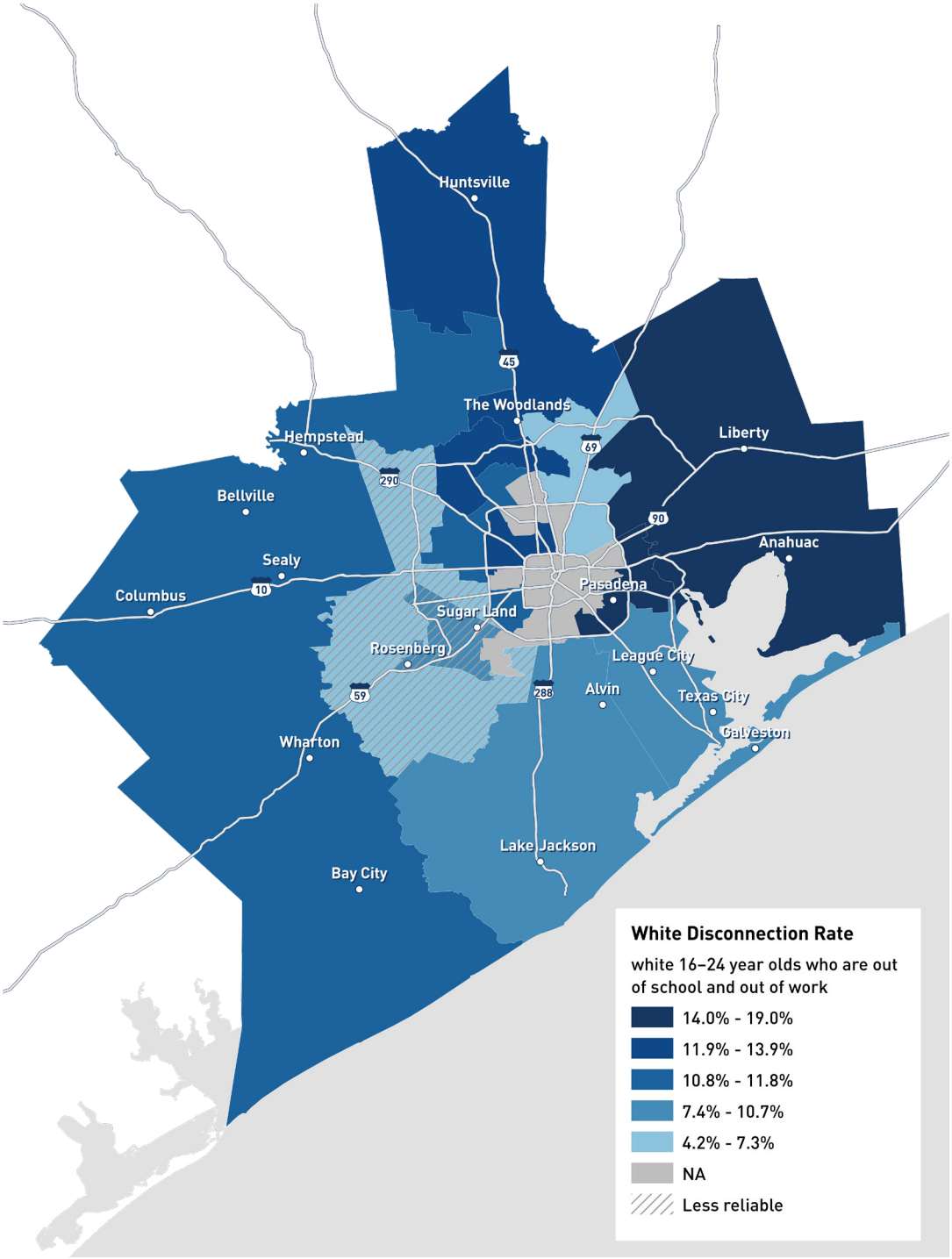
Source: Measure of America analysis of 2018–2022 ACS data from the US Census Bureau. Data are for noninstitutionalized youth.

MAP 10 HISPANIC YOUTH DISCONNECTION IN THE GREATER HOUSTON AREA BY NEIGHBORHOOD CLUSTER



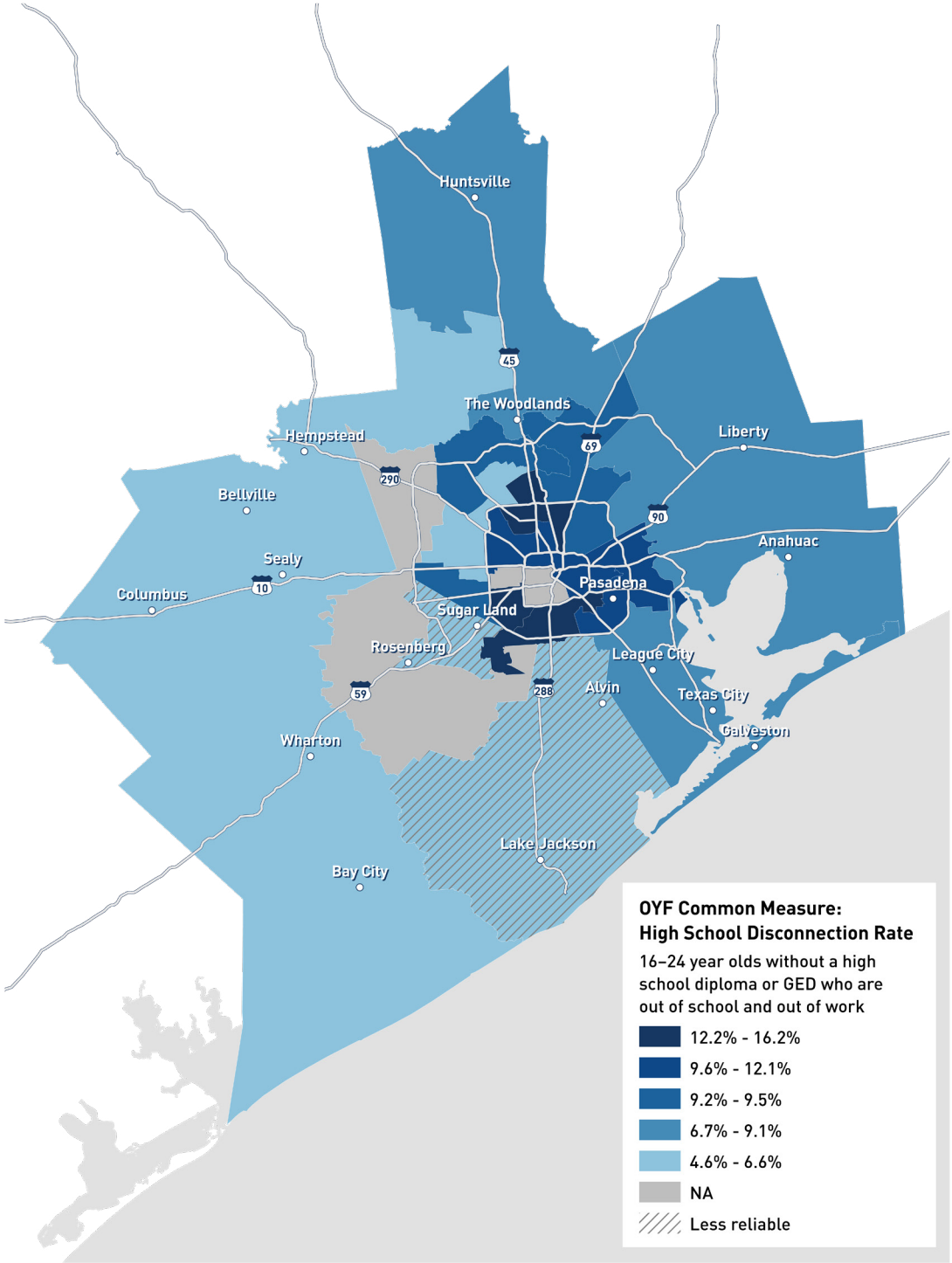
Source: Measure of America analysis of 2018–2022 ACS data from the US Census Bureau. Data are for noninstitutionalized youth.

MAP 11 WHITE YOUTH DISCONNECTION IN THE GREATER HOUSTON AREA BY NEIGHBORHOOD CLUSTER



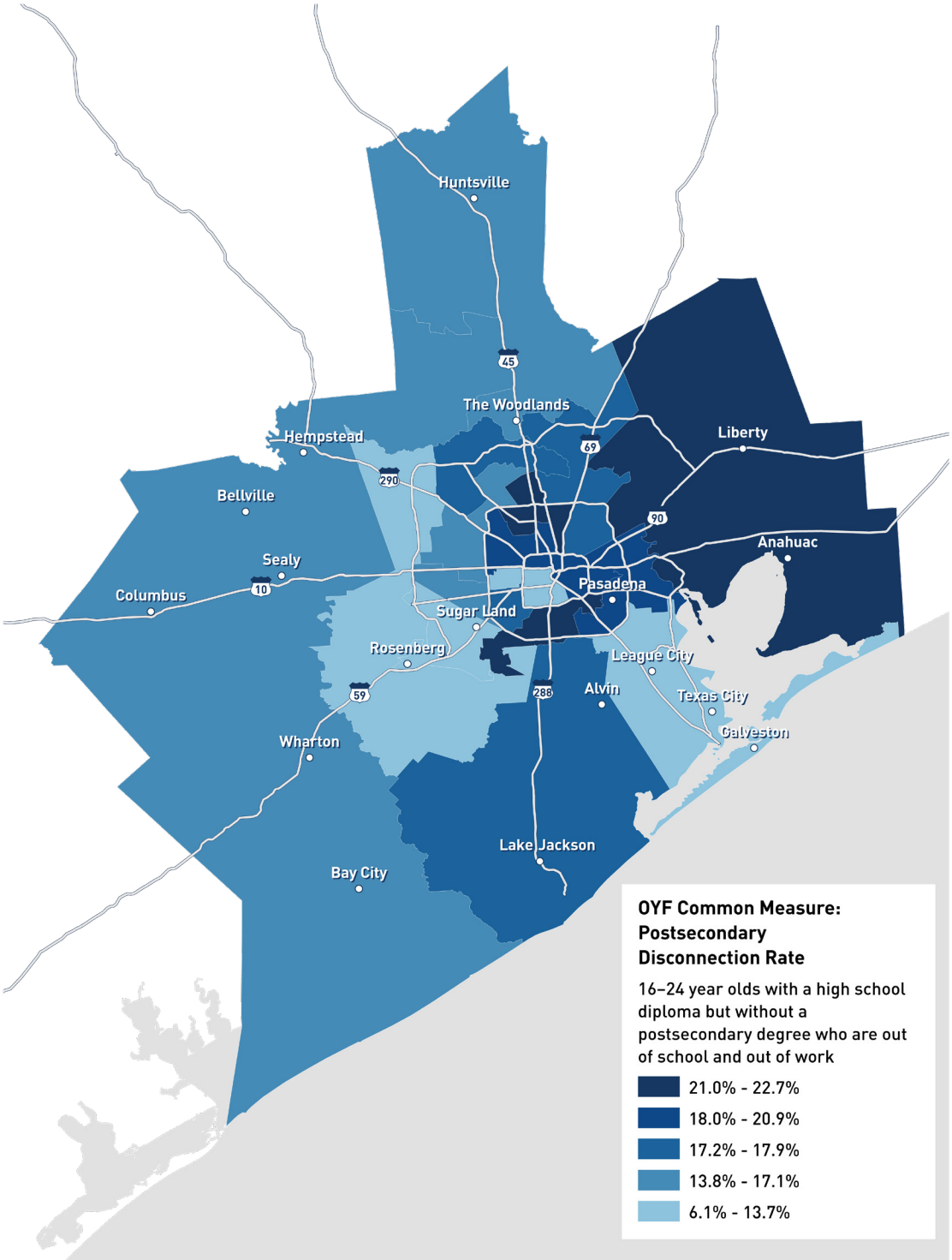
Source: Measure of America analysis of 2018–2022 ACS data from the US Census Bureau. Data are for noninstitutionalized youth.

MAP 12 HIGH SCHOOL DISCONNECTION IN THE GREATER HOUSTON AREA BY NEIGHBORHOOD CLUSTER



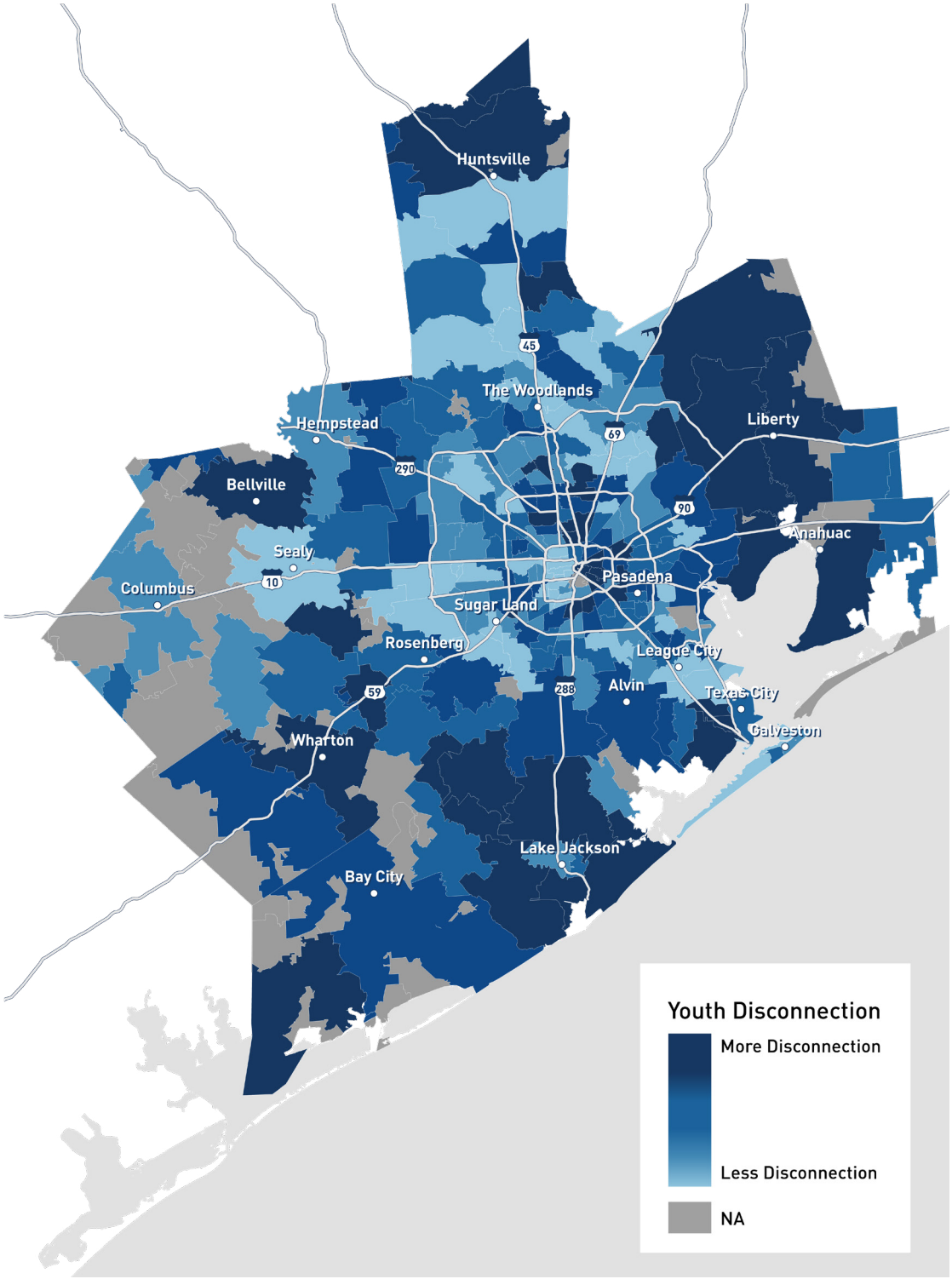
Source: Measure of America analysis of 2018–2022 ACS data from the US Census Bureau. Data are for noninstitutionalized youth.

MAP 13 POSTSECONDARY DISCONNECTION IN THE GREATER HOUSTON AREA BY NEIGHBORHOOD CLUSTER



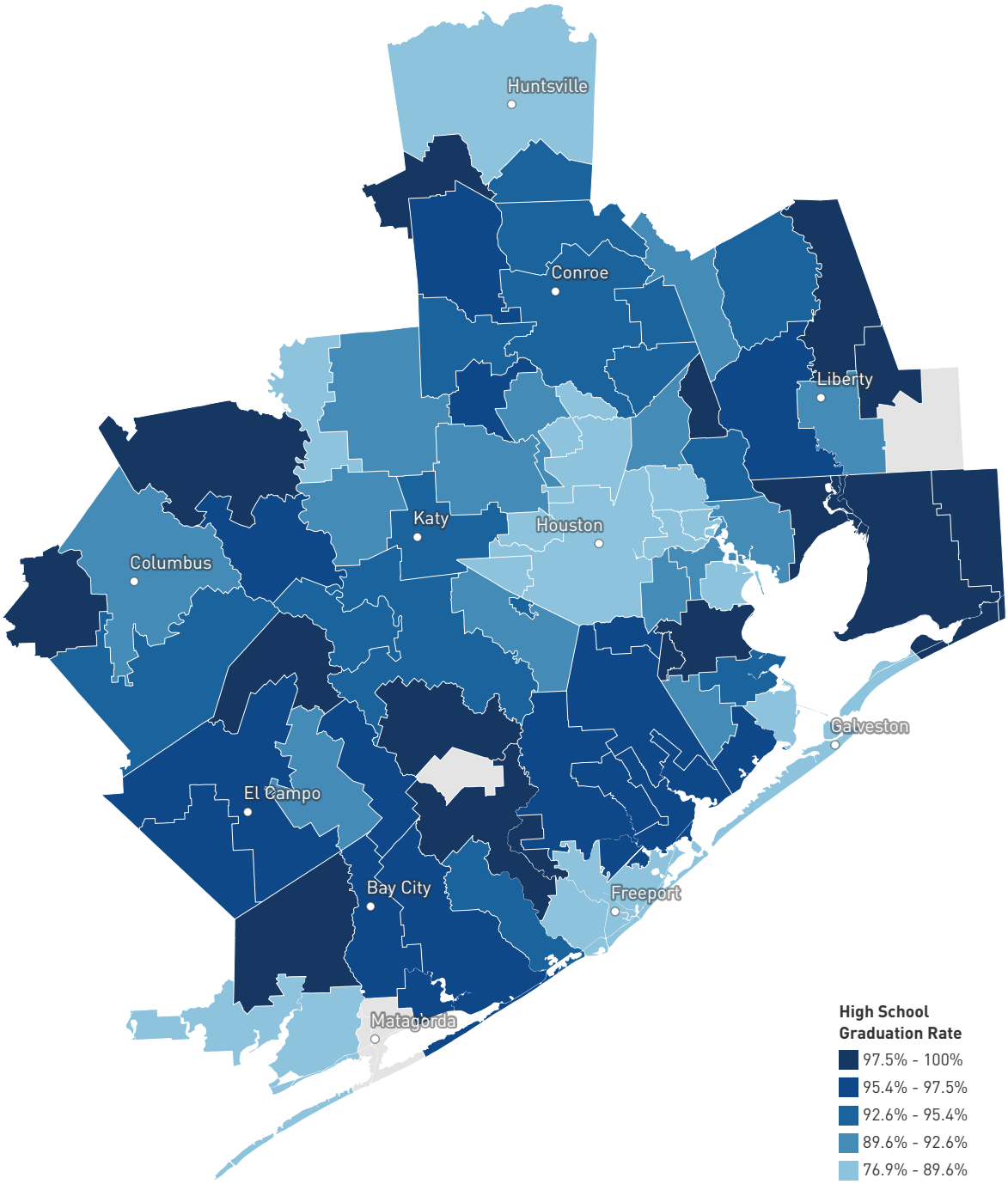
Source: Measure of America analysis of 2018–2022 ACS data from the US Census Bureau. Data are for noninstitutionalized youth.

MAP 14 DISCONNECTION IN THE GREATER HOUSTON AREA BY ZIP CODE



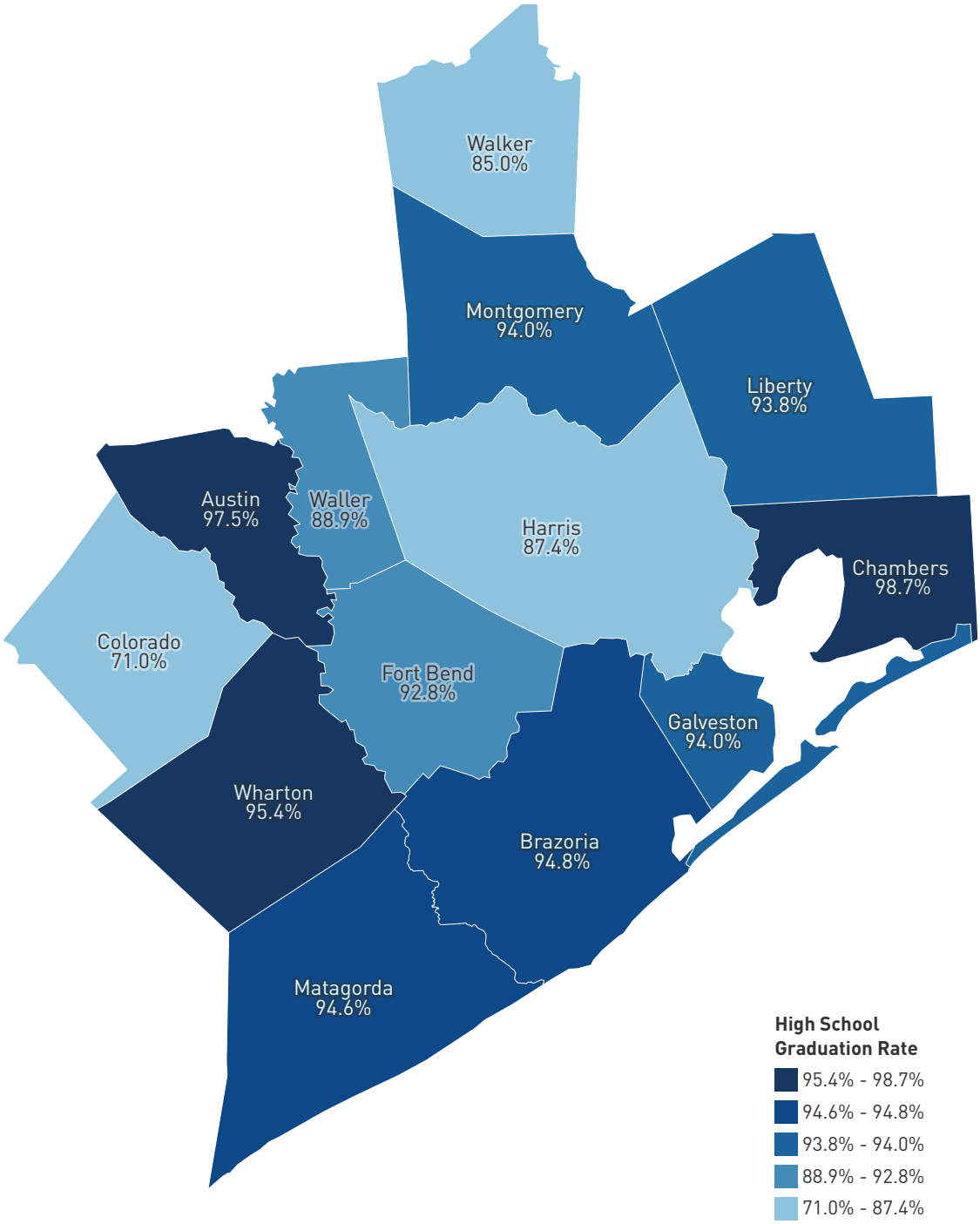
Source: Custom tabulation of 2017–2021 ACS data from the US Census Bureau.
Note: Margins of error were quite high for a large share of ZIP codes, leading us to use more-to-less-disconnection as a framing instead of the less-reliable ZIP-level estimates.

MAP 15 HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES BY SCHOOL DISTRICT IN THE GREATER HOUSTON AREA, CLASS OF 2022



Source: Texas Education Agency, August 2023.
Note: Graduation rate refers to the percentage of students from a class of beginning ninth graders who graduate within four years. Students who enter the system during those four years are added to the class and students who leave the system for reasons other than graduating are subtracted. District-level rates were calculated for federal accountability reporting, not state-level accountability reporting. For the 3 ISDs with no data, either no high schools were present or data were withheld by TEA to protect student privacy. For an interactive version of this map, go to measureofamerica.org/greaterhouston

MAP 16 HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES BY COUNTY IN THE GREATER HOUSTON AREA, CLASS OF 2022



Source: Texas Education Agency, August 2023.
Note: Graduation rate refers to the percentage of students from a class of beginning ninth graders who graduate within four years. Students who enter the system during those four years are added to the class and students who leave the system for reasons other than graduating are subtracted. This graduation rate definition aligns with the federal on-time graduation definition used in the district-level data. County-level graduation rates include students not within ISDs, such as charter schools that cross ISD boundaries. Some of these schools have very low graduation rates. As a result, county-level graduation rates can be lower than constituent ISD rates.

APPENDIX B: GLOSSARY

ASIAN	Non-Hispanic Asian. Does not include Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander Individuals. Racial and ethnic groups in this report are based on definitions established by the OMB and used by the Census Bureau and other government entities.
BLACK	Non-Hispanic Black. Racial and ethnic groups in this report are based on definitions established by the OMB and used by the Census Bureau and other government entities.
DISABILITY	A person is considered to have a disability if they report difficulty with hearing, seeing even with glasses, walking, climbing stairs, dressing, bathing, doing errands alone, concentrating, remembering, or making decisions. This is based on responses to the ACS and does not necessarily imply a medical diagnosis.
DISCONNECTED YOUTH	Teenagers and young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither in school nor working. Young people in this age range who are working or in school part-time are not considered disconnected. Youth who are actively looking for work but are not presently employed are considered disconnected.
HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA	Includes young people with a GED.
HISPANIC/LATINO	People of Hispanic/Latino ethnicity may be of any race. In this report, members of Black, White, and Two or More or Other groups include only non-Hispanic members of these groups.
INSTITUTIONAL GROUP QUARTERS	Nonhousehold institutional living arrangements such as correctional facilities, residential treatment centers, etc. If enrolled in educational programs, youth in institutional group quarters are considered connected.
MILITARY	Youth in the military are counted as employed and thus as connected.
NOT IN SCHOOL	Has not attended any educational institution and has also not been homeschooled at any time in the three months prior to the survey date. The ACS is designed to evenly distribute survey months over the entire calendar year.
NOT WORKING	Either unemployed or not in the labor force at the time they responded to the survey.
POVERTY	Living in a household below the federal poverty threshold.
PUMA	Public Use Microdata Areas are geographic units designated by the US Census Bureau. PUMAs have populations of at least 100,000 and generally less than 200,000.
SNAP	Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.
TWO OR MORE OR OTHER	Refers to combinations of two or more of the following race categories: White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, OR Some Other Race. Does not include Hispanic combinations.
WHITE	Non-Hispanic white.

APPENDIX C: METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

Who Is Considered an "Opportunity Youth" or "Disconnected Youth"?

Youth disconnection rates in this report are calculated by Measure of America using employment and enrollment data from the American Community Survey (ACS) of the US Census Bureau. Disconnected youth, also referred to as opportunity youth, are teenagers and adults between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither in school nor working. People in this age range who are working or in school part-time are not considered disconnected. Youth who are actively looking for work but unable to find a job are considered disconnected.

Several official data sources exist that can be used for calculating youth disconnection. As a result, researchers working with different datasets, or using different definitions of what constitutes disconnection, can arrive at different numbers for this indicator. A good summary of these various definitions can be found in a Huffington Post piece authored by Measure of America in October 2016. Measure of America uses the Census Bureau's ACS for four reasons: (1) it is reliable and updated annually; (2) it allows for calculations by state and metro area as well as by more granular Census-defined neighborhood clusters within metro areas; (3) it includes young people who are in group quarters, such as juvenile or adult correctional facilities, supervised medical facilities, and college dorms; and (4) it counts students on summer break as being enrolled in school.

Methods

In order to arrive at the percentage of disconnected youth, the total number of disconnected young people and the total number of young people overall are calculated for each geography from the ACS Public Use Microdata Sample. "Not in school" means that a young person has not attended any educational institution and has also not been homeschooled at any time in the three months prior to the survey date. "Not working" means that a young person is either unemployed or not in the labor force at the time they responded to the survey. Disconnected youth are young people who are simultaneously not in school and not working. This population cannot be estimated by simply adding the number of young people not enrolled in school to the number of young people not working because many students in this age range do not work and many young workers are not in school.

For the section of this report that analyzes youth disconnection by geography (The Geography of Opportunity in Greater Houston), the noninstitutionalized young adult population is considered. This avoids distortions caused by the presence of correctional facilities or mental hospitals. Noninstitutionalized youth are those who are not residing in "institutional group quarters," the Census Bureau's designation for nonhousehold living arrangements such as correctional or supervised medical facilities. See the glossary above for more information. The ACS is an annual survey conducted by the Census Bureau that samples a subset of the overall population. As with any data drawn from surveys, there is some degree of sampling and nonsampling error inherent in the data. Thus, comparisons between similar values on any indicator should be made with caution since these differences may not be statistically significant. Measure of America does not publish calculated estimates with coefficients of variation over 0.30 and will indicate that estimates with coefficients of variation over 0.25 are less-reliable estimates. For more information on the reliability of ACS estimates that include 2020 as part of a multiyear rollup, refer to this US Census Bureau technical note.

Geographies

Data from the Public Use Microdata Sample are provided in geographic units known as Public Use

Microdata Areas (PUMAs). PUMAs are defined by the US Census Bureau, and are built out of census tracts and counties, and have populations of at least 100,000 people. The Census makes efforts to have PUMAs align with actual neighborhood and political boundaries. The analysis makes use of all PUMAs that constitute the 13 County Region. Walker County is entirely contained within a PUMA that extends beyond its borders. On a population-weighted basis, Walker County consists of 0.403 of that PUMA, and we adjust our estimates to account for the share of the "Deep East Texas COG (West) & Walker County" that comprises Walker County. Due to changes in Census geographies after the 2020 Decennial Census, which took effect for all 2022 data, we merged PUMAs that had substantial border changes and population shifts in order to have consistent geographic shapes for neighborhood-level analysis.

Costing—For this report, Measure of America followed a costing methodology similar to that used in our *Two Futures* report from 2012, which has been used by organizations around the country including the Joint Economic Committee of the US Senate. The endpoint of the costing analysis in *Building Bright Futures in Greater Houston* is to calculate the annual disposable income that connected young adults are likely to have when they are older, as well as the taxes they will pay to state (Texas) government in the form of sales and use tax. We are setting aside certain revenue gains (federal income tax) and revenue savings (reduced utilization of SNAP, Medicaid, TANF, and housing assistance) to focus on a simple framing directly relevant to Houston-area taxpayers.

The first step is to figure out the different earnings that connected and disconnected individuals are likely to have in their thirties. The earnings of these two groups are estimated based on our longitudinal analysis of cohorts in the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), where we compared the earnings of people in their thirties who were consistently connected in their teens and early twenties with people in their thirties who experienced one or more bouts of disconnection from work and school in their teens and early twenties. This premium is around $38,400 (inflation-adjusted to 2022 dollars). We then adjust the average salaries of the formerly connected cohort and formerly disconnected cohort by subtracting nondiscretionary expenses: federal tax, state tax, housing costs, and food costs. Social Security tax, Medicare tax, and other taxes are not incorporated in this analysis. We calculate estimated federal taxes based on income using data from Tax Foundation and Nerd Wallet. We estimated Texas taxes using information from the Texas Comptroller's February 2023 report, *Tax Exemptions & Tax Incidence*, page 51, table 1: "Final Incidence of Tax—By Household Income Quintile." Based on these data we constructed a simple linear model for estimating Texas sales and use tax based on income, and estimate that connected teens and young adults pay an additional $1,770 in state tax each year when they reach their thirties. The median housing costs in the Houston metro area are from the 2022 ACS, Table B25105, and come out to about $15,200 each year. Median annual food costs are derived from USDA food plan estimates for a family of four (low-cost option for the disconnected cohort; moderate-cost option for the connected cohort). The remainder—once these costs have been subtracted—gives us the annual discretionary funds of each cohort. The difference between the cohorts is roughly $26,200. Represented as a simple formula, discretionary income is equal to personal income minus federal taxes, Texas taxes, housing costs, and food costs.

Density—Measure of America grouped neighborhoods in Houston into nine categories based on their population density and youth disconnection rates in order to enable a discussion of opportunity among urban areas as well as more rural areas. Here, we eschew urban/rural definitions

in favor of a more flexible measure of population density based on the University of Minnesota IPUMS average local population density measure of persons per square mile. "Low density" in the Greater Houston context includes 23 neighborhoods with 90 people per square mile (Walker County) to neighborhoods with 2,600 people per square mile (Spring in northern Harris County). "Medium density" encompasses 22 neighborhoods ranging from 3,000 people per square mile (northwest Harris County including the area between Cypress and Kohrville) to 5,700 people per square mile (western Houston and the neighborhoods around Spring Valley Village, Langwood, and Timber Oaks). "High density" includes eight neighborhoods with population densities from 5,900 people per square mile (southwest central Houston, including Memorial Park, the University of Houston, Rice University, Texas Medical Center, and Hermann Park) to 11,700 people per square mile (the neighborhood by the Westpark Tollway, including Mahatma Gandhi District, Gulfton, and Briarmeadow).

Disability—Disability status in this report refers to any enduring emotional, physical, or mental condition that makes everyday activities like walking, dressing, or remembering things difficult and restricts an individual's ability to work or to perform basic required tasks without assistance. This is self-reported; individuals who report having such a condition in the ACS are counted as having a disability. Those who do not report any mental or physical difficulties are counted as not having a disability.

Educational Attainment—The US Census Bureau's American Community Survey collects data on educational attainment with the following question: "What is the highest degree or level of school this person has completed?" It does not capture attainment of vocational/educational certifications, certificates, and licenses.

Group Quarters—The US Census Bureau refers to people who live in any kind of non-household living arrangement as living in "group quarters." These can be institutional group quarters such as correctional or supervised medical facilities or noninstitutional group quarters such as college or university dormitories or military bases. One of the primary advantages of using the ACS as the data source for this research is that the survey includes young people living in group quarters. Read more about these categorizations here.

Poverty—Throughout this report a threshold of the federal poverty line is used to designate youth living in households below poverty.

Racial and Ethnic Groups—Racial and ethnic groups in this report are based on definitions established by the OMB and used by the Census Bureau and other government entities. Since 1997, this office has recognized five racial groups and two ethnic categories. The racial groups are Asian, Black, Native American, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, and white. The ethnic categories are Hispanic and not Hispanic. People of Hispanic ethnicity may be of any race. In this report, members of each racial group include only non-Hispanic members of that group; for example, all references to Black and white youth include only those who are non-Hispanic. Due to the small population sizes of some of the racial and ethnic groups, we cannot always present reliable estimates of youth disconnection for them.

APPENDIX D: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Who are opportunity youth and young adults (OYYA) or disconnected youth?

We define disconnected, or opportunity, youth and young adults as young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither working nor in school. This is the definition that MOA has used in its data calculations and analysis on youth disconnection since its first report on the topic, *One in Seven*, published in 2012. It's also the foundation for most other youth disconnection estimates.

It is important to be aware of how a group or researcher defines the disconnected or opportunity youth population; while our definition is widely used, some make modifications based on their target population, and these modifications affect the numbers. Using different age ranges, including poverty or high school graduation status as part of the definition, counting job-seekers as well as people with jobs as "connected," and other variations to the basic definition yield different rates and numbers. Some groups focus on teenagers as young as 14, for instance, and others include adults as old as 29.

Here are some frequently asked questions about the definition MOA uses.

Where do the data in the report come from?

Most of the data in the report related to young people and disconnection from work and school is the result of Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS) data. The survey's main advantage over other sources is that its sample size is extremely large, making it possible to calculate youth disconnection rates nationally and by state, as well as for counties, metro areas, and even smaller geographic areas. The ACS also allows for disaggregation by race and ethnicity and by gender for geographies with sufficiently large populations.

The ACS contacts 3.5 million households each year and has an annual budget of around $245 million. The ACS is not perfect; for example, there is a time lag of at least one year between when the data are collected and when they are released. But despite its shortcomings, the ACS is the best data source available for detailed, local-level population data on a wide array of social and economic indicators.

For this report, MOA also drew upon educational data from the Texas Education Agency (on-time high school graduation rates and absenteeism data) and criminal justice data from Harris County (via the Texas Center for Justice and Equity and the Harris County District Clerk).

The data or work of other researchers is transparently cited where used.

What defines "out of school" and "out of work"?

Someone is considered to be a "disconnected youth" or "opportunity youth" if they are out of school and out of work.

"Out of work" includes people who are unemployed but looking for a job as well as people who don't have jobs and aren't looking for them. Full- and part-time work count as employment, as does self-employed work, gig economy work, and unpaid family work on a farm or at a family business. Childrearing and other domestic or family work are not considered employment.

"Out of school" includes young adults who are not in any high school, home school, or some other schooling leading toward a high school diploma or college degree. Youth and young adults on summer break are considered to be in school; if the last time an individual has attended school has been greater than three months ago, they are considered to be out of school. Young adults who are in industry certification programs are considered to be not in school. The ACS does not collect data on attendance and completion of non-degree-granting programs.

Why ages 16 to 24?

This age range captures an important period of life known as "emerging adulthood," when young people typically complete their educations, begin their working lives, and start to live independently. It is also a period when the life paths of young people diverge significantly. Dropping out of high school before age 16 is quite uncommon, for instance, and almost everyone this age is in school; similarly, most young people age 25 and older have completed their educations. But the variation within those years is significant and consequential in terms of life trajectories.

This age range is the same or nearly the same as the age ranges covered by internationally used definitions of the out-of-school, out-of-work youth population, which in the United Kingdom, European Union countries, and other places is called "youth who are not in employment, education, or training" (this group is often referred to by its acronym, NEETs). When MOA first calculated the rate and number of US young people falling into this category in 2012, we sought to replicate this well-known and frequently used definition.

What about people who are out of work but looking for a job?

In our definition, people who are out of work and out of school are disconnected, even if they are looking for a job. This differs from the concept of being "in the labor force," which the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Census define as people who are either working or actively looking for work. Because we are looking at connection to school or work, we include only those who have a job. Having a job, rather than just looking for one, is the status that confers benefits to a young person, from wages to on-the-job training to work experience and more. In addition, even applying for a single job online over the past month counts as actively looking for work in this definition, which is a fairly low bar.

What are opportunity youth doing if they are not in school or working?

Young adults who are not in school and not in work may be actively searching for a job. They may have recently graduated high school, college, or a credentialing program and are attempting to enter the full-time labor market. They may be discouraged workers who were persistently unemployed and have given up seeking employment, they may be caring for children or other family members, they may be temporarily or permanently disabled, or they may be doing something else.

What about people at risk of disconnection?

Young people currently out of school and work are not the only young people who require support. Many groups of young people are economically and socially vulnerable, such as foster and homeless youth, young people living in neighborhoods characterized by concentrated poverty, and teens and young adults involved in the criminal justice system. Even if they don't fall into the disconnected category right now, they are more likely than others their age to have been or to become disconnected. We are currently working to craft a new definition that would encompass both currently disconnected young people and young people at risk of disconnection; this definition would not replace our current definition, since consistency is vital to tracking change over time, but rather supplement it.

Keep in mind that the Measure of America definition of disconnection focuses on people who are entirely disconnected (at the time of the survey) from the critically important institutions of work and school. There are many more young people with a tenuous connection to the labor market. For example, there are 65,000 young people 16–24 in Greater Houston who are working only part-time and not in school—7.2% of the entire youth and young adult population.

What about children of well-off families who are taking their time to find a job?

There are young adults who fit this mold who haven't immediately transitioned from one step on the career or educational ladder to another. However, it's overwhelmingly the case that young adults who are disconnected from work or school are not the same young adults who have many advantages and a strong family and academic safety net. Young men and young women below the poverty line are twice as likely to be disconnected as their counterparts above the poverty line. The further young adults are from the poverty line, the more likely they are to be connected to work and school.

What about gig economy work?

"Gig work," a term used to describe freelance and independent contracting work performed on apps or sites like Uber, DoorDash, or Taskrabbit, has become an increasingly common part of the US employment landscape. By 2021, 16 percent of adults had worked in the gig economy; for those ages 18 to 29, that number increased to 30 percent.[73] Despite the prevalence of these employment arrangements, the ACS does not currently ask questions specifically about gig work. The ACS's questions about employment focus on a person's primary job; 68 percent of those who participate in the gig economy do not do so as their primary form of employment, but rather as a secondary job, or a part-time job for students or individuals with other primary responsibilities.[74]

While the experiences of gig workers may not be directly represented by this survey, for those gig workers who are students, have another primary job, or consider gig work to be their primary job, the ACS would allow them to self-identify as in-school or employed, and they would be considered connected in our youth disconnection calculations. Although they are connected, it is important to consider the specific challenges that this population of workers experience: 29 percent of gig workers report earning below the state minimum wage, and 35 percent say they have felt unsafe while working.[75]

Is Greater Houston's youth disconnection rate really this high?

Measure of America's work spotlighting the high rate of disconnection in Houston is based on a tried-and-true and uncontroversial definition of youth disconnection that's widely used in the field and became the field's consensus definition of the term after Measure of America began its series of annual reports on this population in 2012.

The Measure of America definition of opportunity youth and young adults is the same definition and data source used by the Kinder Institute's 2016 report *Houston's Opportunity* as well as the Texas Workforce Investment Council's September 2024 report: *Youth in Texas: A Demographic Study*, and is the same definition and data source used by the Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions as well as other research organizations, service providers, and government entities across the country. The Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas's research series in 2021 used the same Measure of America definition of youth disconnection, but a different survey product (the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Current Population Survey or CPS).

Additionally, the finding of high youth disconnection rates in Greater Houston aligns with conclusions of other researchers. Research by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis from August 2024 reinforces the findings of *Building Bright Futures for Greater Houston*. There are some relevant differences: the St. Louis Fed work uses a different age range (young adults 18–24), a different data source (the CPS), and rolls up data from January 2017 to April 2024 into a 7-year, 4-month average.

These differences aside, the St. Louis Fed found that among the 25 largest metro areas by population, the Houston 9 County MSA is tied with Detroit for the 2nd highest older-youth-disconnection rate at 19.0%, behind Tampa at 19.4%, and has substantially higher older-youth-disconnection than the US average

across this period: 15.6%.

The Kinder Institute's *Houston's Opportunity* report found that, in 2014, 14.2 percent of young adults ages 16 to 24 were not in school and not working in Houston's 9-county MSA (a higher rate than MOA's 2022 calculation of 13.3 percent across the 13 County Region and the 9-county MSA). At the time of the Kinder report, when compared to the 100 largest metros in the US, Houston ranked in the middle; as *Building Bright Futures* makes clear, youth disconnection rates in Greater Houston have decreased slower than other metro areas, Dallas, and the United States as a whole. This underperformance would not have been as apparent in the 2012 data used in Kinder Institute's report for between-metro-area comparisons, since this trend emerged only over the past decade.

Should young women who have children count as connected?

First of all, it is a mistake to make a blanket assumption that young mothers in jurisdictions where abortion is illegal have freely chosen a future of childrearing.

Second, it is likewise a mistake to assume that young women who have children do not have goals and aspirations in addition to motherhood; they may, for instance, have sought to continue their educations but found the school environment hostile to their new status as mothers. They may wish to enroll in community college or take workforce and technical education classes but can't find affordable childcare. They may be searching for a job with a regular, dependable schedule that allows them to make childcare arrangements with family members, but all they can find are jobs with just-in-time scheduling that make planning impossible. Fifty-six percent of young mothers 16–24 in Greater Houston are in the labor force—a majority of young mothers have, need, or want jobs. In addition, young mothers are disproportionately living in poverty, and thus also experience the barriers that poverty creates to stable employment, such as housing instability and lack of transportation.

Third, in Texas in 2021, 12 percent of children had a family member who either quit a job, did not take a job, or had to significantly change a job due to childcare issues. Burdensome childcare costs can be a significant barrier for young mothers' ability to work or attend school. When childcare costs are high and the cost of childcare approaches parity with the post-tax wage someone can earn, women are less likely to enter or remain in the labor force.

Finally, common economic measures like GDP and employment do not consider unpaid domestic work like childrearing to be employment or economic activity. Measurement of youth disconnection typically follows this larger trend.

How do young mothers fare in Greater Houston as compared to other cities?

Of the top 10 metro areas by population for which reliable 1-year estimates of disconnected young mothers could be calculated, Greater Houston and San Antonio had the highest shares of mothers not in school and not in work, 41.6 and 41.0 percent, respectively. In the United States as a whole, 33.4 percent of mothers in this age range are disconnected.

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