



NEWS RELEASE

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Youth Disconnection Rates and Covid-19-Fueled Learning Loss

Measure of America's latest report on young people aged 16 to 24 who are neither working nor in school breaks down 2021 youth disconnection rates by race and ethnicity, gender, and place and explores the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on education.

BROOKLYN, NY – October 3, 2023 – [Measure of America](#), a project of the [Social Science Research Council](#), today released [Ensuring an Equitable Recovery: Addressing Covid-19's Impact on Education](#). The 2021 national youth disconnection rate is 12.1 percent, or 4,680,900 disconnected youth—an improvement on the 2020 rate, 12.6 percent, but still falling short of the pre-pandemic rate of 10.7 percent. The rate had been steadily falling for nine years in a row, a 27 percent decrease from 2010 to 2019, before increasing a striking 13.1 percent between 2019 and 2021 with the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Ensuring an Equitable Recovery is the latest in Measure of America's series of annual reports on teens and young adults ages 16–24 years who are neither working nor in school, a group referred to as disconnected youth or opportunity youth. The youth disconnection rate is a vital metric of access to opportunity and societal well-being. People acquire skills, credentials, habits, and experiences fundamental to a rewarding, productive, and joyous life during their teens and early twenties. The youth disconnection rate thus tells us which young people in our society have the chance to lay the groundwork for freely chosen, flourishing lives and which groups face serious challenges in the transition to adulthood. Research shows that being disconnected as a young person has long-term consequences; it's associated with lower earnings, less education, worse health, and even less happiness in later adulthood. Determining who remains disconnected, and why, is vital to identifying strategies and interventions, especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Covid-19-fueled learning loss set already vulnerable young people further behind their peers and at risk of being permanently scarred by lost educational opportunities. School enrollment for youth ages 16–24 dropped to 59.3 percent in 2021. Declining enrollment is especially notable for 18–19-year-olds; their 2.6 percent decrease from 2019 to 2021 is unprecedented in our analysis going back to 2006. Postsecondary enrollment rates have dropped across the board, but especially so for Latino and Native American young adults, who already had the lowest postsecondary enrollment rates prior to the pandemic.

Employment rates for young adults decreased as well, at roughly double the rate of enrollment, in the aftermath of Covid-19. Even youth who are still in school have been impacted—nationwide testing data reveal that low-income, Black, and Latino students disproportionately remain behind where they would have been were it not for the pandemic. Sharp learning losses have worsened the wide and long-standing gap in outcomes between rich and poor districts and, if not successfully addressed, may 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.

Another particularly striking finding is that the share of all young people with at least one disability increased sharply between 2019 and 2021. In 2019, 6.7 percent of young adults ages 16–24 had a disability; in 2021, 7.8 percent of young adults did: 3,045,000 individuals, an increase of nearly one half million young adults. **The cognitive disability rate for young adults in this age group increased 21.8 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 Latino youth were especially affected.

Key findings in *Ensuring an Equitable Recovery* include:

- **National rate:** The 2021 youth disconnection rate is 12.1 percent, or 4,680,900 young people.
- **Gender:** As in past years, girls and young women at the national level are less likely to be disconnected than boys and young men, 11.5 percent versus 12.6 percent. The size and direction of the gender gap varies by race and ethnicity and by place, however.
- **Native American youth:** Nearly one in four Native American teens and young adults are neither working nor in school. The Native American youth disconnection rate is 23.4 percent, the highest of the United States' five major racial and ethnic groups.
- **Black youth:** Black teens and young adults have the second-highest disconnection rate, 18.9 percent, or 966,300 young people. Black young people have the largest gender gap in the youth disconnection rate of any racial or ethnic group—16.4 percent for Black girls and young women, compared to 21.4 percent for their male counterparts.
- **Latino youth:** The Latino youth disconnection rate stands at 14.0 percent, or 1,286,200 young people. In past years, Latina girls and young women were slightly more likely than their male counterparts to be disconnected. In 2020, both rates sat at 14.0 percent, but in 2021, the female and male rates have separated again slightly, 14.1 percent versus 13.9 percent.
- **White youth:** The disconnection rate for white teens and young adults is 9.8 percent, the second-lowest rate. White teens and young adults make up the largest absolute number of disconnected youth, 1,946,500 people.
- **Asian youth:** Asian teens and young adults have the lowest disconnection rate, 6.9 percent, or 140,000 young people. Rates vary widely by Asian subgroup and gender, however, from a low of 3.4 percent for Korean girls and young women to a high of 17.6 percent for Hmong boys and young men.
- **States:** North Dakota has the lowest youth disconnection rate (7.0 percent), followed by Iowa (7.1 percent) and Delaware (7.3 percent). New Mexico has the highest rate (20.5 percent), followed by Louisiana (17.7 percent) and Alaska (16.5 percent).
- **Metro areas:** Provo-Orem, UT (6.8 percent), boasts the lowest youth disconnection rate of the 100 most populous metro areas in the country, followed by Ogden-Clearfield, UT (also 6.8 percent due to rounding but nonetheless a hair behind Provo-Orem), and Boston-Cambridge-Newton MA-NH (7.0 percent). The highest youth disconnection rate can be found in Memphis, TN-MS-AR (19.9 percent), followed by Stockton, CA (19.8 percent), and McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX (19.3 percent).
- **Congressional districts:** Iowa's 3rd Congressional District, which includes Des Moines and the southwestern portion of the state, has the lowest youth disconnection rate, 5.2 percent. New York's 15th Congressional District, which includes New York City's South Bronx as well as western portions of the Bronx, is home to the highest youth disconnection rate, 24.5 percent; it is also the poorest of the country's 435 Congressional Districts.

The full report is available [here](#), and more demographic data is accessible at Measure of America's [interactive website](#).

About Measure of America

An initiative of the **Social Science Research Council**, Measure of America provides easy-to-use yet methodologically sound tools for understanding the distribution of well-being and opportunity in America and stimulating fact-based dialogue about issues we all care about: health, education, and living standards.