

Testimony of Sarah Burd-Sharps Committee on Youth Services, The New York City Council November 22, 2016

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I want to start by applauding the Council's efforts to address youth disconnection in our city. Our work in other cities and counties has confirmed that it's a problem that is responsive to efforts to reconnect kids and also to programs and policies that prevent disconnection from happening in the first place.

I co-direct a nonpartisan project at the nonprofit Social Science Research Council based in Brooklyn called Measure of America. Our focus is on improving people's well-being and expanding their choices and opportunities. One recent area of increased data analysis and research for us is youth disconnection because of the way it stunts young people's well-being at a critical moment in their lives and can leave scars that endure years later.

In New York City, roughly 180,000 teenagers and young adults in the 16 to 24 year age range are neither working nor in school. This is far too many kids disconnected from institutions that give purpose to their days and meaning in their lives. But what our research tells us is that there are astonishing disparities within cities by race and by place. These disparities hold critical clues to the solutions. While the NYC rate is 15.8 percent, in Manhattan's 7th Community District—the Upper West Side and West Side—the rate of youth disconnection is **3 percent**, which translates to 391 kids. In the South Bronx Districts 1&2 (Hunts Point, Longwood, Mott Haven, Melrose), the rate is **33 percent**, representing 8,423 kids.

Turning to race and ethnicity, in the greater New York metro area, the white rate of youth disconnection is 9 percent, the Latino rate 17 percent and the black rate is more than double the white rate: 19 percent. Because of limitations in Census Bureau data, we could not calculate the Asian rate this year.

What becomes clear from these enormous disparities is that in order to better target efforts to address disconnection, we need more granular data than we have had in the past. In my written testimony, I have included more data. But with my limited time, I want to focus now on what our research tells us about the most important factors

associated with youth disconnection. I will focus on only 5 main factors:

- 1.) Disconnected youth are nearly twice as likely to live in poverty.
- 2.) They are three times as likely as connected youth to have a disability.
- 3.) While personal attributes like persistence, willingness to work hard, impulse control, etc. are critical for young adults to succeed, programs that focus only on these personal characteristics are missing a vital point: Disconnected youth overwhelmingly come from disconnected families in disconnected communities. These are places where parents and other adults also struggle with education or connection to the workforce. These are communities that are isolated from transportation options to where jobs are, and where schools and public institutions are chronically underfunded. And they are places where adult social networks for helping kids find jobs, internships or for acting as mentors are relatively limited.
- 4.) A fourth surprising, and somewhat disheartening, factor is that when we calculated disconnection rates across 2,000 U.S. neighborhoods 15 years ago, we found rates of youth disconnection in 2000 were highly predictive of what they will be today. This relationship holds true even when you control for population growth and demographic change. What does this tell us? It suggests an absence of action on a scale necessary to make meaningful change for far too many years. But it also tells us that in neighborhoods like Brownsville, Central Harlem, East Flatbush and many parts of the South Bronx where disconnection is almost the norm, it sets a poor example for younger children and shapes their own expectations about the future.
- 5.) And finally, as the data show, place matters. Race matters. But our analysis shows that the combination of the two really packs a wallop. Residential segregation has dramatic but very different consequences for young people depending on their race. In highly segregated metro areas like NYC, Chicago, Washington DC, and Detroit, black youth tend to have higher-than-average rates of disconnection, whereas white youth tend to have lower-than-average rates of disconnection. In other words, residential segregation by race disproportionately harms black teenagers and young adults. And it disproportionately advantages young white adults, who are more likely to live in neighborhoods with good schools, strong adult networks for mentorships, jobs, with convenient transport and concentrated advantage.

What the above factors show is that youth disconnection is not a spontaneously occurring phenomenon. It is a problem years in the making. Engaged young people

from middle class neighborhoods rarely drift away from the worlds of school and work. So in order to reduce disconnection, we need to support these kids in the context of their communities. There is increasing research on what works and why. Summer jobs or youth jobs programs do offer young adults valuable things: self-confidence, money in their pocket, understanding about expectations in the workplace. But evaluations four or five years later consistently show these programs don't tend to have lasting effects.

The most promising programs for addressing kids who are currently or are at risk of becoming disconnected include additional supportive interventions: **job training programs** that build in remedial numeracy and literacy programs as well as the famous soft skills everyone's always talking about; **partnerships between businesses and nonprofits** that combine paid work with wraparound services to help young adults grapple with personal and family issues or health and housing challenges; **apprenticeships** that culminate in a postsecondary credential they can take with them. And all of these programs need to include follow-up with the kids for 3 to 5 years to help youth maintain a connection to the workforce after they graduate from the program.

These programs cost more than a one-off job placement. But in the long run, they are actually far cheaper than the status quo. We are already paying a high price for youth disconnection through juvenile justice, incarceration, crime, higher health costs, lost tax revenues, and much more. We could instead be paying for success in the form of investing in low-income communities, in our schools, and in programs that offer lasting pathways for disconnected youth.

Thank you.

County	Youth Not in School and Not Working 2014 (% ages 16-24)	Youth Not in School and Not Working 2013 (% ages 16-24)	Youth Not in School and Not Working 2014 (total number ages 16-24)
UNITED STATES	13.2	14.2	5,252,896
Bronx	22.8	23.4	47,385
Brooklyn	18.5	19.1	59,545
Manhattan	12.9	13.4	24,525
Queens	14.8	14.5	39,435
Staten Island	14.8	14.7	8,505

Source: Measure of America calculations using U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey PUMS Microdata 2010–2014.