



Creating The Healthiest Nation: Opportunity Youth

RISK FACTORS BEHIND DISCONNECTION



INDIVIDUAL

adolescent parenthood
substance abuse
disability or chronic illness
limited English proficiency



FAMILY

parental incarceration
in or exiting foster care
low parental education
housing instability
generational poverty



COMMUNITY

neighborhood violence
underfunded schools
concentrated poverty



SOCIETY

discriminatory housing, admis-
sions, disciplinary, hiring, medi-
cal, and policing practices

Emerging adulthood — the transition between the late teens and early 20s — is a crucial developmental stage. During this time, young adults obtain the education and training that will subsequently provide the foundation for strong occupational and health trajectories throughout their lives. For many young people, however, stumbling blocks at this stage make it difficult — if not outright impossible — to remain engaged in these experiences. As a result, approximately 4.35 million youth across urban, rural and tribal communities — or 11.2% of the population ages 16 to 24 — were disconnected from school and the workforce in 2018.¹

Education and employment are well-established indicators of health and overall well-being, and a disconnect from either poses both short- and long-term health risks. When compared with their connected peers, disconnected youth — also referred to as opportunity youth in recognition of the benefits made possible by a return to school or work and the tremendous potential they hold — are at greater risk of chronic diseases and, in turn, premature death.² Such disparities highlight the need to address youth disconnect in broader efforts to create the healthiest nation.

WHO ARE OPPORTUNITY YOUTH?

Nearly one in three opportunity youth live in poverty, a rate twice that of their connected peers. As a result, they are also more likely to experience the compounding impacts that come with living in areas of concentrated poverty, including low-quality education, poorer health, less access to transportation and higher rates of violence and resulting trauma.⁶

In addition, opportunity youth are more than three times as likely to have a disability as their connected peers, five times as likely to struggle with independent living, and more than twice as likely to live apart from both parents, an indicator of traumatic childhood experiences. Young women who are disconnected from education and the workforce are more than twice as likely to be married and four times as likely to be mothers in comparison with their connected counterparts.⁷ Opportunity youth are also more likely to have a history of court involvement, a mental or physical disability, emergent bilingual status, or significant family obligations.⁸

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

While significant progress has been achieved in reducing the population of opportunity youth over the last 10 years, the COVID-19 pandemic and associated economic crisis are expected to reverse recent progress.

Unemployment. Young adults are most likely to be unemployed or underemployed, least likely to be able to work from home, and more likely to work in those industries hardest hit by the pandemic. At its height, unemployment for workers ages 16–24 jumped 16% between 2019 and 2020, with Black, Latinx, and Asian American and Pacific Islander youth forced out of the workforce at disproportionately high rates.³

Digital Divide. For students, disparities in digital and nutritional access are widening existing opportunity gaps. Half of all Native children and one in three Black and Latinx children lack either computers or high-speed internet access at home. Native, Black and Latinx school-age children are also two to three times more likely to live in households receiving SNAP benefits than their white or AAPI peers, meaning they are more likely to rely on free or reduced-price meals at school to get the nutrition they need to fully participate in the school day.⁴

Social Isolation. Learning from home has also meant many students are disconnected from school-based supports and connections that typically serve as protective factors against stress, depression and suicidality. Such a loss is particularly profound for students already at heightened risk for disconnection from education and the workforce, with schools holding the potential to provide affirmation for LGBTQ youth or stability for youth involved with child welfare or experiencing homelessness.⁵

As we reimagine a more equitable health care infrastructure, it is imperative that public health professionals prioritize this population to preserve the health, well-being and socioeconomic stability of our nation.



Aligned with broader racial and ethnic disparities in the US, Native, Black and Latinx youth are overrepresented in the disconnected population. Before the pandemic, approximately 25% of Native youth, 18% of Black youth, and 13% of Latinx youth were disconnected; for white and AAPI youth, disconnection rates were 9.4% and 6.6%, respectively.⁹

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF YOUTH DISCONNECTION?

The impacts of disconnection are profound. Youth who are not in school or employed for at least six months are one-sixth as likely to obtain a high school or college degree and five times more likely to have a criminal record when compared to connected youth.¹⁰ Opportunity youth are also more than 20 times as likely to live in institutionalized group quarters, including psychiatric and correctional facilities.¹¹ Disconnected teens who are married and mothering are at increased risk of domestic violence, poor birth outcomes and postpartum depression.¹²

High school graduation is a particularly stark indicator for overall well-being; in fact, of the social determinants, educational attainment is the single greatest predictor of health and well-being across the lifespan.¹³ Employment prospects and earning potential are better for high school graduates, with each year of high school completion associated with a 15% increase in lifetime wealth.¹⁴ Compared to high school and college graduates, adults who do not complete high school are at higher risk of poor health and more likely to die prematurely from preventable conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes and stroke.¹⁵

The opportunity cost for the individual is accompanied by a financial cost at the societal level. Youth who do not graduate from high school are less likely to find a job or earn a living wage than their graduated peers; as a result, they are more reliant on health and income security entitlements like Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Multiple cross-sectional studies have attempted to measure the national financial impact of youth disconnection, including lost earnings and tax revenue, with estimates ranging from \$26.8 billion to \$93 billion annually.¹⁸

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These individual and societal costs are also felt and borne out by future generations. The children of adolescent mothers, for instance, are more likely to experience health problems, lower academic achievement, and increased rates of dropout, incarceration, unemployment, and teen parenthood.¹⁹ Such cyclical outcomes are compounded by structural racism: even controlling for protective factors like education, Black, Latinx and Native families in the US hold a fraction of the wealth of white families due to persistent housing, financial and labor market discrimination. Limited access to stable jobs, good wages, affordable health insurance and tax-advantaged benefits like retirement savings creates financial insecurity, hinders economic mobility and ultimately impedes the ability to pass wealth to future generations.²⁰

WHAT STRATEGIES CAN ADDRESS YOUTH DISCONNECTION?

Because there is no one reason that young adults become disconnected from school and the economy, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to improving outcomes for opportunity youth. To best support reengagement, public health professionals should consider cross-sector interventions that are equity focused and youth-driven.

ENSURE QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION. As they age, youth who had access to quality early childhood education are significantly more likely to graduate from high school and less likely to experience teen pregnancy and involvement with the criminal justice system.²¹ But early childhood education is chronically underfunded in the US — caregivers outspent the government in this sector by approximately \$6 billion in 2017²² — and Black and Latinx children are often closed out of high-quality public preschool programs, with statewide enrollment rates as low as 4% and 1%, respectively, during the 2017–2018 school year.²³



Experts in their Lived Experience

Despite the many hurdles they face in connecting to school and the workforce, opportunity youth are highly motivated to seek academic and professional success and, in turn, serve as a provider and role model for their communities.¹⁶ In surveys about their experiences, opportunity youth have expressed a strong sense of personal responsibility for their lives, an eagerness to access resources like peer networks and mentors, and confidence in their ability to finish high school, go to college and land a good job.¹⁷ In seeking to improve outcomes for opportunity youth, public health professionals should embrace an asset-based approach that acknowledges the expertise these young adults hold regarding the factors that lead to disconnection, the persistent challenges to engagement and the supports needed to reconnect.

AT THE STATE AND LOCAL LEVEL

Ensure coordinated care for pregnant and parenting students includes access to childcare or two-generation educational models that allow them to continue with school. One such example is the [California School-Age Families Education Program](#), or Cal-SAFE, which pairs school-based academic and parenting skills support services for expectant or parenting students with quality childcare for their children.²⁴

AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL

Advocate for the establishment of a universal pre-K program that funds early childhood education for all children ages 3–4, as well as high-quality training and livable wages for early childhood educators.

PROMOTE CROSS-SECTOR AND CROSS-SYSTEM COLLABORATION. By definition, opportunity youth are disconnected from the major institutions that would otherwise connect them to safety net resources, opportunities to increase self-reliance and constructive relationships. Unfortunately, due to the breadth and severity of risk factors that lead to disconnection, these same youth are also more likely than their connected peers to require the support of multiple social services to meet basic needs and less able to access diffuse resources.²⁵

AT THE STATE AND LOCAL LEVEL	Urge health departments to collaborate with local education and community agencies on the promotion and delivery of youth-focused health services, as well as the maintenance and analysis of indicator databases. Establish community-university partnerships like PROSPER as a means of bringing together agencies, community leaders, and impacted youth to implement hyperlocal and evidence-based school, family and community prevention programs. ²⁶
AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL	Cultivate systems of care aimed at facilitating a “no wrong door” approach for disconnected youth who would benefit from multiple forms of support. Authorized in 2014, Performance Partnership Pilots for Disconnected Youth , or P3, make it easier for state, local and tribal governments to create such systems by allowing jurisdictions to pool discretionary funding from several federal agencies and waive specific program requirements with the explicit purpose of improving outcomes for opportunity youth. ²⁷

PROVIDE COMPREHENSIVE SEX EDUCATION. Young women who are disconnected from school and work are more than four times as likely as their connected peers to be mothers, and teen mothers are half as likely as non-parenting peers to receive their high school diploma by age 22. Youth need access to high-quality, evidence-based sex education in order to prevent unintended pregnancy, combat sexual violence, make informed decisions about overall sexual health and — ultimately — remain in school.²⁸ Yet the federal government has spent more than \$2 billion on abstinence-only programming since 1982,²⁹ and only 39 states mandate some form of sex education.³⁰

AT THE STATE AND LOCAL LEVEL	Implement sex education that addresses all facets of sex and sexuality in an inclusive and affirmative manner, emphasizing consent, agency and autonomy.
AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL	Redirect abstinence-only funding to programs that, among other elements, acknowledge and respond to the needs of sexually active youth. ^{31, 32} Ensure that federal funding for existing sex education programs adheres to rigorous standards of evidence and complete, unbiased science-based information in grant announcements, awards, evaluations and implementation.

REPLACE EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE WITH RESTORATIVE PRACTICES. Out-of-school suspension rates have dropped significantly over the last decade, but disparities in the use of exclusionary discipline practices remain.³⁴ In the short term, suspensions and expulsions translate to lost instructional time and fractured relationships, without evidence to suggest effective improvement in student behavior. Instead, such practices increase the likelihood that students will disengage from or drop out of school entirely and become entangled in the justice system.³⁵ In contrast, research suggests that restorative justice practices — placing an emphasis on repairing relationships — can decrease youth involvement in the juvenile justice system.³⁶

AT THE STATE AND LOCAL LEVEL

Implement restorative alternatives in schools, such as peer mediation for classroom conflicts, substance abuse recovery services for students referred for drug-related offenses, and family engagement in place of court referrals for chronic absenteeism.

AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL

Reinstate the 2014 school discipline guidance package and prohibit federal and state funding for programs related to exclusionary school discipline and school resource officers.³⁷

Amend the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, to require that state and local jurisdictions demonstrate a commitment to restorative justice principles.

INVEST IN THE TRANSITION FROM K-12 TO HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE WORKFORCE. The period following high school graduation holds immense promise, but it also presents a challenge for youth lacking clarity around “next steps” in their academic and professional lives or the necessary financial resources to pursue desired training and credentials. Given the importance of this particular transition point, an array of programs and policies already exist to create pathways between high school, further education and the workforce; for many opportunity youth, what is needed is not a new suite of interventions, but rather better investment in and alignment between what already works.

AT THE STATE AND LOCAL LEVEL

Prioritize investment in evidenced-based ESSA programs — such as dual enrollment and early college high schools — that disproportionately benefit underrepresented students.³⁸ In several states, access to dual enrollment coursework is mandatory and publicly funded, maximizing access for low-income students.³⁹

AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL

Increase investments in youth-focused job readiness training, education and employment support programs funded by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, including [Job Corps](#)⁴⁰ and [YouthBuild](#).⁴¹

Implement regular increases to the maximum Pell Grant award to catch up with inflation. Evidence suggests that even modest increases improve attendance and completion among low-income students.⁴²

UNDERSTAND DISCONNECTION AS A CONTINUUM... While opportunity youth are typically understood as those fully disconnected from school or work, a more expanded definition includes youth who are “insufficiently attached” to these institutions and support systems, such as students who are chronically absent or individuals considered underemployed in jobs that do not match their skill set or meet their economic needs. Interventions should be tailored to the type and level of disconnect experienced by youth in order to fully realize the opportunities available to them; in addition, interventions should be further differentiated to address the factors that lead individual youth to disconnect.

... AND BUILD THE DATA TO SUPPORT A CONTINUUM OF CARE. There is minimal longitudinal data documenting the specific pathways that young people follow into and out of disconnection — information that should be foundational to prevention and reengagement strategies for opportunity youth. We also have an incomplete picture when it comes to demographics, with key national surveys like the American Community Survey failing to include questions about sexual orientation and gender identity despite evidence that transgender and gender-nonconforming youth are more likely to miss school, have lower grades and report a negative school climate than their peers.³³ Public health professionals can advocate for a national survey of opportunity youth that establishes common indicators, fills these gaps and provides a blueprint for stronger data monitoring at the local level, as well as the inclusion of more expansive demographic indicators in existing survey tools.

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